ALL STORIES NEW... NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SECOND NOVEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

COWBOY LAWYER
by Frank C. Robertson

BEGINNING

EMPIRE WEST
a new serial
by Parker Bonner

RANCH FLICKER TALK
By The Famous Movie Star
ROBERT CUMMINGS

LOOSE FALSE TEETH?

The makers of POLIDENT offer you Double Your Money Back unless this

Amazing New CREAM Holds Plates Tighter, Longer THAN ANYTHING YOU EVER TRIED

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
NOVEMBER NUMBER

November 19, 1954
Volume 188, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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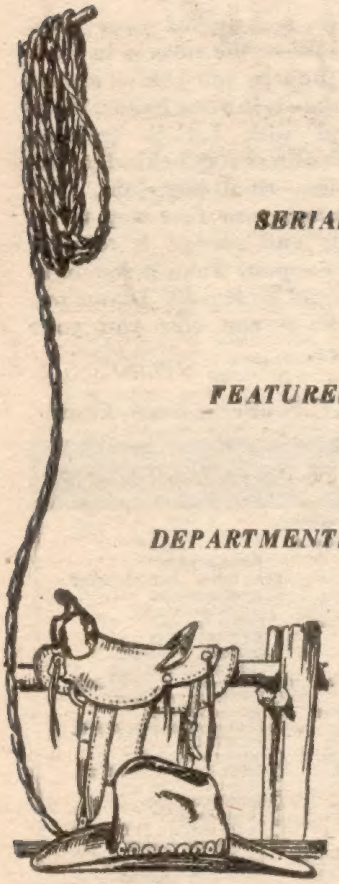

HELEN TONO
Editor

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National Radio Institute
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Needs Morale Booster

Dear Editor:

I am a firm believer in the fact that mail is the biggest morale booster for servicemen overseas. Therefore I'm writing to you in the hope that you can aid my morale. I am a Marine, now stationed in Korea, and would be grateful if you would print my plea. I'm 6', weigh 210 lbs. am interested in all sports and love dancing. My age is 23. I would like to hear from anyone who would care to drop a few lines. Thanks very much.

S/SGT. RAY E. KAELIN USMC

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Won't Wait Long

Dear Editor:

May we, a couple of lonesome Canadian readers, have this letter published in your column? From the seeming popularity of your column we have no doubt that we need not be lonely much longer, should you be kind enough to grant our request. I'm 30, 5'11", weigh 170 lbs, and have brown hair and gray eyes. My pal is 40, 5'11", 190 lbs., brown hair and blue eyes. Any of the opposite sex is welcome to write to either one of us.

RUDOLPH LESK
JOHN GUBKA

3825 Colonial Ave.
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

From 10-110

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for about 4 years and have always wanted to write to the Our Air Mail column. I stand 5'2", weigh around 85 or 90 lbs. I'm 14 and my hobbies are stamp collecting, collecting handkerchiefs, and swimming. I will write to anyone from 10-110 Will exchange photos.

JEANNE LEWIS

834-13th St.
Huntington, W. Va.

Irish Don't Give Up

Dear Editor:

I tried once and am now trying again. I happen to be Irish, so I don't give up easy. So how about a real cowboy gettng in your Our Air Mail? I'm 6'2", weigh 190 lbs., have blue eyes and dark brown hair, am single, and will answer all letters. So here's hoping.

JAMES REESE

Box 12, American Falls, Idaho

Nothing to Do

Dear Editor:

I have a lot of spare time and nothing to do, so I would like a lot of pen pals. I love to write letters and receive them. I am a blond, hazel eyed, and am in the 8th grade. I will be 14 in September. I will be glad to exchange letters with everyone, and would especially like to hear from some boys. Please print my letter, as I am anxious to receive some answers. Thank you.

CAROL ALSON

R.R. #2
Rodney, Michigan

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Southern Boy

Dear Editor:

I am a single man, 28 years old. I am from Georgia, but being away from home I get rather lonesome. So won't you girls please write to me? I promise to answer all letters.

FRANK HARBIN

4019 Porter
Detroit 9, Michigan

Likes Many Things

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine and enjoy it very much. I would like to get some pen pals who like writing letters as well as receiving them. I am 17 years old, with blond hair, hazel eyes, and am 5'4" tall. I am interested in sports, music, and reading, among other things. I will answer any letters I receive, from both boys and girls of any age.

RUTH KAY JACKSON

5827 Fairbrook
Long Beach, California

Texas Gal

Dear Editor:

Won't you please find room in Our Air Mail for a lonely Texan? I am twenty-one, 5'2", have brown hair and gray-green eyes. I love all sports, but dancing and TV are my favorite pastimes—next to writing. I love to write letters. So come on, all you guys and gals, and cheer up a lonely Texan.

VELMA ASHMORE

821 N. Brain
Borger, Texas

First Try

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting into your Air Mail column. I hope I succeed. I'm 17 years of age, weigh 105 lbs., have black hair and dark eyes, and stand 5' even. Some of the things I like are dancing, skating, writing letters, and reading. My hobby is collecting picture postcards and records. I promise to answer all letters received, and will exchange snaps. So come on, all you guys and gals, help fill my mail box, and I will see what I can do to keep yours filled.

JEAN BURTON

220 Brook Street
Medea, Pennsylvania

Going Abroad

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it very much if you would print this request for pen pals. I would like to hear from boys and girls, 21 to 30, who live in foreign countries, particularly the British Isles and the Irish Free State. I am planning a trip abroad and would appreciate having friends to visit. I am twenty-four, 5 ft., 110 lbs., and have red hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are reading, stamp collecting, writing, and bicycling.

JEAN M. STEVENS

2017 Goodrich Avenue
St. Paul 5, Minnesota

Blue-Eyed Blonde

Dear Editor:

I like to read Ranch Romances very much, and would like my letter to be published in Our Air Mail. I am 17 years old, have dark blond hair and blue eyes, and weigh 110 lbs. My favorite hobbies are Western music, horseback riding, and raising flowers. I live on a farm and am very lonely. I would love to hear from servicemen, and from boys and girls between the ages of 16 to 28. So come on, write me a letter.

JOYCE GOODWIN

Route 1
Clarksville, Texas

Guitar Player

Dear Editor:

How about printing this plea for pen pals in Our Air Mail? Please don't let me down. I am 17 years old and have brown eyes and hair. I weigh 125 lbs. and stand 5'5". I like to swim, hunt, and fish, and I also play the steel guitar. I've played for a few dances. I will answer all letters; they will be greatly appreciated, for I am very lonely.

BENNIE ALTON MAYO

Route 1
Paducah, Texas

Baseball Fan

Dear Editor:

I am 13 years old and am in the 8th grade. I have brown hair and blue eyes, stand 5'4", and weigh 105 lbs. I love all outdoor sports, especially baseball. I will exchange snaps with anyone who cares to do the same.

JUDY WEBB

P. O. Box 70
Middlesboro, Kentucky

Lonely Farm Girl

Dear Editor:

I think Our Air Mail is a fine page. I am a lonely farm girl, 15 years old. I would like to hear from boys from 15 to 30. I stand 5'5", and weigh 128 lbs. My hobbies are reading, horseback riding, and dancing. I especially like to read Western books.

CAROLE LINNEMEYER

Copeland
Idaho

Lady From the Hills

Dear Editor:

I'm a regular reader of your wonderful magazine, Ranch Romances, and really enjoy it. This is the third time I've written, and I surely hope you can spare a small space for me soon. I'm a home-type lady in my forties, and I get awfully lonely up here in the hills. Would like to hear from lots of pen pals from 40 to 70. My hobbies are reading, listening to the radio, cooking, and growing flowers. I shall be looking forward to lots of mail soon.

N. E. WEBB

R.F.D.
Hillsville, Virginia

Young Veteran

Dear Editor:

I'm writing this in the hope that some of your readers will drop me a line, as I'm very lonesome. I'm a young Korean vet, 24 years of age, 6 ft. tall, 200 lbs., with brown hair and eyes. For the past four months I have been a patient at the Veterans Hospital, with no hope in sight of discharge or cure. My morale has really been low, and a letter or two would help pass the time. I'll answer all mail, and will exchange pictures with anyone. Please don't let me down.

GEORGE R. RODNEY

Ward 1-U, Room 1055
U. S. Veterans Hospital
Aspinwall
Pittsburgh 15, Pennsylvania

Paratrooper

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get into your pen pal page. I am a paratrooper in the 11th Airborne Division. I have brown eyes and brown hair, weigh 165 lbs, am 5'10" tall, and am 20 years old. Would like to hear from anybody.

PFC PAUL F. PRUITT, R.A. 23185506

C Batty, 560 F.A. Bn.
Fort Cambell, Kentucky

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A TULARE, Calif., man asked permission to discontinue his local bus line for lack of business. Big-hearted local motorists give a lift to anyone they see waiting at a bus stop.

POLICE of Reno, Nev., gave up the search for 500 stolen worms—valued by their owner at $500—because, police said, the worms would be impossible to identify even if found.

A CAFE OPERATOR in Ottawa, Kansas, is used to people who bring their lunch into his eating place and only order coffee, but he was a bit miffed when two women even brewed their own coffee with a canned heat percolator.

A CITY COUNCIL inquiry in Omaha, Neb., disclosed that plans for a new fire station made no provision for a fire alarm system or telephones.

A SAN FRANCISCO, Calif., woman, terrified by a call from "Charlie, the killer," had police investigate and learned that the caller was the head of a termite exterminating company.

PEOPLE DON'T trust each other any more, a Boone, N. C., psychology student concluded, when he offered $1 bills to 23 strangers on the street, and only three bills were accepted.

IN LOS ANGELES, Calif., a sailor who learned a trade—engraving—was indicted for putting his new knowledge to use by producing 400 $10 and $5 bills.

IT WASN'T BLOOD that smeared a Los Angeles, Calif., highway after a truck went out of control, but a load of lipstick from a cosmetic shipment.

A SAGINAW, Mich., army captain received, by mistake, a check for $23,928 instead of his usual $50 uniform allowance, but ruefully admitted that he couldn't cash the check because his name was misspelled.

A HIGH SCHOOL BOY in Norman, Okla., who had been in and out of trouble throughout his high school career, sent a personal invitation for his graduation exercises to the police with this notation, "For your information, I made it."

AN ADVERTISEMENT in an Indianapolis, Ind., paper indicates that the ultimate in auto construction has apparently been reached. The ad read, "For Sale: 47 Merc. Conver., with kitchen sink."

A POLICEMAN in Berlin, Ohio, was fired when he gave as his excuse for not chasing a thief that he would be off duty in three minutes and it wouldn't be worthwhile to join the chase for that short time.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

DRUM BEAT

Alan Ladd and a tribe of marauding Indians fight it out in Warner Brothers' lively new Cinema-Scope Western

THE INDIAN is no longer the vanishing American. At least, he's certainly being seen bigger and more colorful than life on the nation's movie screens.

In Warner Bros.' latest Western, *Drum Beat*, the Modoc tribe of northern California go on the warpath in Cinemascope and WarnerColor, and they're realistic and terrifying enough to tempt you to get under your seat.

However, between you and the redmen's tomahawks is Alan Ladd, and that's enough protection for any movie fan.

I shouldn't sound flippant about *Drum Beat*, though, because it's really a strong, serious and thrilling movie—not a laughing matter at all.

And it's actually a true story about a young man with a mission given to him by the President of the United States. Ulysses S. Grant did call a young frontiersman to Washington to discuss the problem of the murdering, marauding Modocs, and then sent this frontiersman to the California-Oregon border—not as a fighter but as a peacemaker.

This is the part that Alan plays—one that fits him like his blue jeans. He is the hero of the expedition—but history doesn't record whether there was a heroine. In *Drum Beat* there is, of course. She's an Eastern aristocrat with a pioneering urge, played by Audrey Dalton, who shares the arduous trip and most of the adventures with Alan.

There are two more feminine parts in the picture—both of them tragic. Isabel Jewell plays a frowsy woman whose murder by the Modocs makes peacemaking impossible. Marisa Pavan plays an Indian girl who falls in love with Alan and gives her life to save him.

Marisa, by the way, is Pier Angeli's twin sister, and though her acting career didn't start with as much of a splash, I think, after one look at her, that it will be as successful as Pier's.

Charles Buchinsky, whom you'll remember with horror if you saw *House of Wax*, plays the leader of the renegade Modocs. Charlie, a nice guy really, has never been anything but vicious on the screen. In fact,

he's never gotten through a single movie without knocking some one off. And in *Drum Beat* he hits his all time high (or low) in villainy.

Warners hoped to make the picture in the actual locale where it happened, but that turned out to be impossible.

In 1869, there weren't many people around in Northern California, but there are *too* many now. Too many, at least to stage any Indian battles. So the company went to Arizona, where there's plenty of wide open country left.

There were actually up to 500 people working on location at one time, which was far too many to be housed in motels or even in private homes. The studio hired a company which puts up temporary housing for construction workers all over the world, to do the same for them.

All the adjectives like "colossal" and "stupendous," which Hollywood used to throw around for any B picture, really apply to *Drum Beat*. Most of the action takes place outdoors, and yet crewmen had to build no less than 80 sets.

Half of them were used on the location site and the other half at the Warner studio. Some of them are quite elaborate—like a frontier trading post, the operating room at a primitive hospital and a section of Washington, D. C., just after the Civil War.

But others are very simple—a jail cell, a few headstones for boot-hill, and a gallows.

Though Indians are the villains of the piece (the ones you'll see in the *simple* sets described above), their problems are treated with great sympathy in *Drum Beat*. The days when Western movies used to imply that the only good Indian is a dead Indian are gone forever.

And that, I think, is as it should be. It's too late to right the wrongs done to the American Indian, but it's never too late to remember them.

Warner Brothers

Alan Ladd talks peace with Anthony Caruso and Marisa Pavan

ALEX NICOL
Understudy to Star

RANCH FLICKER TALK

DID YOU ever hear the story about the young actor who was the understudy of the big star in a Broadway production?

Oh, sure, you'll say. The big star was suddenly stricken ill. The understudy jumped into the part. The critics raved. A new star was born. Ho, hum.

But you're wrong. My story has a new twist. The star (who was Henry Fonda) never developed so much as a sniffle, even though the play (which was *Mr. Roberts)* ran for three years, and the young understudy (who was Alex Nicol) never did get to play the lead on Broadway.

However, that production of *Mr. Roberts* did give Alex his big break. Because he also played a small part in one act—and that was enough to give a Hollywood talent scout the idea that Alex ought to be in the movies.

He made his first picture in New York, so he was before the cameras in the daytime and before an audience at night. But after that, if he wanted to be in the movies, he had to go to Hollywood, so he regretfully bade good-bye to *Mr. Roberts.*

Or so he thought. But a couple of years after he arrived on the Coast, he was asked to do the show at the Pasadena Playhouse, this time in the lead. He was seen by an English producer, who signed him for two movies in England.

"*Mr. Roberts,* you know, is a play about the Navy," Alex told me, "so I figured it was just a case of my joining the Navy and seeing the world."

But while he was growing up in Ossining, N.Y., he never had any intention of seeing the world—as a sailor or an actor. He went through the usual small-boy routine of wanting to be a fireman and a policeman, but he finally settled on being a dentist.

The older he got, though, the bigger he got—and the handsomer he got. His first job was as a lifeguard at a fashionable resort. The girls, of course, clustered around him (when they weren't pretending to drown). And he laughed when they told him he ought to be a movie star.

" 'Silly girls' I said," Alex remembered. " 'Me, a movie star?' But the more I said it, the more it sounded like a good idea. Not a movie star, perhaps, but at least an actor. So I enrolled in dramatic school."

That was in 1935, and his small part and understudy job in *Mr. Roberts* came along in 1949. So, as you can see, it was a long wait for the big break.

Not that Alex was either starving or idle during those 14 years. He got a few small parts in other shows, and when TV came along he worked in it regularly. But in those days TV actors were paid a mere pittance. So Alex also got a job as a straight man to a nightclub comic.

Also in that 14-year period was a three and a half year hitch in the Army.

And when the war was over and he was discharged, Alex threw away his uniforms. "I didn't want to wear khaki even for odd jobs around the house," he told me.

But he still had a couple of uniform-clad years ahead of him, because one job he got was in *South Pacific,* and another was in *Mr. Roberts.* In both of them he played a sailor.

Which just about brings us up to date on Alex Nicol, except that he has a wife, Jean, who used to be an actress, and a three-year-old daughter, Lisa, who undoubtedly will be one some day.

Universal-International

Alex's original ambition was to be a dentist

ED DAWSON HUNG UP his guns to practise law . . .

till a range war and a girl changed his mind

Cowboy Lawyer

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

BEFORE Ed Dawson could get his feet planted as he stepped from the stage, he was drawn into a bear hug by his brother Rube. Then Rube shoved him away at arm's length and gazed at him affectionately, his kindly face twitching with emotion and pride.

"Thought those three years would never go by, but it's great to have you back," Rube said.

"It's good to be here," Ed said. At the moment he meant it with all his heart, yet it wasn't quite true. He had worked long and

For the first time in his life Cletus Curry was knocked out

hard for his admission to the bar, but this quaint little cow town was hardly the place to carve out a great career.

He owed everything—his legal education, and his character—to this big man in faded overalls, and through all the years of struggle Rube had blandly assumed that Ed would come back to Copperton to practice, as soon as he was admitted to the bar. He couldn't let Rube down. There were sound reasons why he should start in here, as well. It would cost money to get started in a big city, and money was what the Dawsons didn't have. Yet in a sense it was an abnegation as well as a beginning.

"So you're a lawyer at last," Rube said, his eyes shining with pride and pleasure. "Wait till I show you the office I've got all fixed up for you—right over the bank. All it needs is your shingle out in front."

"Rube, while I'm still able to say it, I want to tell you how eternally grateful I am for all you've done. It's far more than money. I know I'll never be able to pay it back," Ed said.

"Why, your just getting an education is all the pay I'll ever want," Rube said. "And it wasn't me. You did it all yourself."

It wasn't true, but Ed said, "How's Pop and Mom?"

"Darned anxious to see you," Rube grinned. "Pop stays about the same—still gets out in the corral in his wheel chair to give me hell. But Mom's failing some. She won't admit it, but she is."

TWENTY years Win Dawson had been confined to that wheel chair, and during those twenty years Rube had supported the family, beginning when he was only thirteen. Ed had contributed, too, but always he had had a driving urge for knowledge. There had been neither money nor time for school, yet he had studied hard at home. After he was grown there had been correspondence courses and finally, at the end, his three years at law college, at the cost of hard work and sacrifice on Rube's part to see him through. He was twenty-nine now, but he had what he wanted—or at least part of what he wanted.

"Come on," Rube said.

They crossed the dusty street to the bank. When they reached it, a grim looking old man came out of the building and stopped in front of them.

Rube said, "Hello, Cletus." The huge, arrogant old man, who still wore his shaggy gray hair as long as Ed remembered, gave a grunt that might have been construed as a greeting. He stared at Ed. "So you're back," he said. "Never could understand how you ever thought you could be a lawyer."

"A man can try, Mr. Curry," Ed replied.

"Humph!" Cletus Curry growled, and walked away from them.

"Hasn't changed a bit, except maybe for the worse, has he?" Ed remarked. "It would sure hurt him to see a Dawson amount to something, wouldn't it?" Ed was sorry the moment the words were out of his mouth, for it sounded like some sort of a reflection on Rube.

"It sure would," Rube said. "But you're the boy that will show him."

"I suppose Earl is just as contemptible as ever," Ed said.

"Earl's dead," Rube answered. "Come on up to the office and I'll tell you about it."

That was a surprise. Ed had never thought anything could happen to Cletus Curry's spoiled son.

Rube unlocked a door on which already was painted on the frosted glass:

EDWARD DAWSON
Attorney-at-Law

Rube had to stop to admire it. The office was small but well furnished, with the books Ed had shipped on in advance in shelves along the wall.

"How do you like it?" Rube asked.

"It—it's wonderful," Ed said. "But you've spent more money on it than you should."

"The best is none too good for my kid brother," Rube said.

Mostly to change the subject Ed asked, "What happened to Earl Curry?"

"He was shot to death," Rube said. "And you're going to defend the kid who's accused of murdering him."

"Hey, wait a minute," Ed protested. "I've never tried a case. I'm not experienced enough to take a murder case. I don't want to get a man hanged."

"You'll win it," Rube said confidently.

"Who is it? Anybody I know?"

"You never saw him. Right after you went away old Cletus got married again, to as fine a woman as you'd ever meet. She had two grown children, a girl and a boy—and a lot of money. Six months ago she got killed. She and old Cletus were taking a horseback ride, and her horse fell off a ledge."

"Accidentally?" Ed queried.

"So Cletus claims," Rube said dryly. "Anyway, when the kids asked for their mother's money, Cletus denied that there was any, and ran the kids off. They moved into Copperton and tried to sue Cletus, but couldn't find a lawyer to take their case. About two weeks ago the boy, Harley Turner, rode out to the ranch and Earl beat him up. Earl came into town right after Harley did, and on his way home that night somebody drygulched him. Harley's been in jail ever since."

"That all the evidence they've got?"

"No," Rube admitted reluctantly. "The sheriff claims he found horse tracks that fitted those of Harley's horse. Cletus says he'll hang the kid if it takes his last dollar. You know how wrapped up he was in Earl."

"I know. He spoiled him rotten," Ed said, remembering some of his own unpleasant experiences with the son of the richest man in the county. "But if there isn't any other suspect, it'll look bad for the boy."

"That's why we're depending on you," Rube said.

RUBE'S blind faith in Ed's untried ability was appalling. Ed said, "I hate to disappoint you, Rube, but I simply can't take the case. Why doesn't Turner get Ern Willmore?"

"Willmore has been hired by Cletus as special prosecutor to help Sherm Parkin. So, you're the only other lawyer in Wah Wah county. You've got to take it," Rube said triumphantly.

Ed didn't know how he was going to make Rube see how impossible it was, how unfair to the accused man to trust his life in the hands of an inexperienced attorney. But he simply could not take the case. In addition to his inexperience, there was a more impelling reason. For years it had been all Rube could do to keep the ranch on Portneuf Creek going, and if the Dawsons interested themselves in behalf of Cletus Curry's enemies, the powerful cattleman would start a range war against Rube which could only end in Rube's destruction. Cletus Curry was as ruthless as he was implacable.

Ed said quietly, "It just won't do, Rube. I'm not qualified. They'll have to import a lawyer. I assure you Turner will stand a much better chance that way."

It hurt Ed to see the look of disappointment that came over Rube's face. Probably only two people in the world, Ed himself, and their mother, knew that behind Rube's rough, rugged exterior lay the heart and soul of an incurable idealist; that he was a man almost dedicated to self-sacrifice in behalf of others, with a nature as gentle as a woman's, but a man who could become terrible when that gentle nature was stirred to wrath by injustice. At all costs Rube must be kept out of a feud with Cletus Curry.

Rube said only, "The Turner kids haven't got a cent. Getting a lawyer from outside is out of the question."

"Then the county will have to bear the expense," Ed stated. "A defendant in a murder case is entitled to counsel."

The brothers climbed into the democrat wagon which Rube had driven into town, stopped long enough to pick up Ed's luggage at the station, and drove the ten miles out to the Dawson ranch.

Halfway home they were passed by two riders on C Bar C horses; tanned, expressionless men whom Ed had never seen before. The men parted to pass the wagon, but didn't speak. They closed in just ahead of the team, and though they had been riding hard they now dropped back to a

walk, so that Rube had to slow down to a comparable gait, since he couldn't pass them. It was a deliberate annoyance.

"Looks like Cletus has been getting some new men," Ed said.

"Yeah, some hard-boiled Texans. Real hard cases," Rube said. "The tall one calls himself Latigo Gordon. The little runt is Jock Smalley. Either one would kill you for a dime."

The Texans kept them in the dust for half a mile, then spurred up to a lope and soon disappeared.

Rube drove into the yard of an obviously old and run-down ranch. Ed noticed that the corrals were in good shape, but all the buildings were badly in need of paint. Rube was a neat and orderly man, and with a twinge of conscience Ed realized that the cost of the paint had gone into his education.

The wagon had no more than stopped when a gray-haired woman with shoulders stooped from hard work ran out of the house. Behind her, in a wheel chair, came a man who had once been as big and powerful as Rube.

Ed leaped to the ground and embraced his mother. "Oh, son, it's good to have you home again," she cried.

"It's wonderful to be here," he said.

But as he looked at her he noticed that his mother's cheeks were sunken and much of the sparkle was gone out of her eyes. She had aged terribly. When she smiled he saw that most of her teeth were missing, and he felt ashamed. Again, the money that should have been spent for dental work for her had gone into his education. What right, he asked himself savagely, had he to accept such sacrifice when he should have stayed on the ranch to help Rube get

the things his parents needed? He had, in fact, always protested against their helping him, but they had forced it on him.

He turned to his father and shook his hand. He couldn't see any great change in him. Win Dawson alone had never been enthusiastic about Ed's becoming a lawyer. The accident which had broken his back many years ago had soured his disposition and left him crabbed and discontented. Ed had not inherited his driving ambition from his father, nor had Rube inherited his gentle disposition from him. Both qualities had come to the boys from their mother. Because he was a chronic objector, Win Dawson had become the least important member of the family. Now, however, he seemed happy at the return of his younger son.

"It's good to see you again, Dad," Ed said. "You don't look a day older than when I left."

"Why should I, since I've been dead anyway for twenty years," Dawson said grimly.

"Winfield, don't talk like that," Jane Dawson reproved gently. "Ed is home again and everybody should be happy. Put up your team, boys. We'll have dinner ready as soon as you wash up."

Ed enjoyed handling horses again. He led one of the horses to the stable, and Rube took the other. Their father had come to the door in his wheel chair, but when Ed volunteered to push it back to the house, Dawson angrily refused to allow it. "I'm not quite helpless yet," he flared in harsh, angry tones.

WHEN Ed stepped into the house it was as though he had never been away. The same old furniture stood in the same places; the bare board floors were scrubbed just as clean. Everything was the same.

Then, suddenly, the house wasn't just the same, for, as he stepped into the dining room, he saw a strange girl putting a huge platter of fried chicken on the table. She was a pretty girl with black hair, a dark, clear complexion, and an honest face. Her features were not regular, but she had a mouth that was meant for laughter. Now, though, tragedy saddened her hazel eyes as plainly as the print in a book.

"Virginia, this is Ed." Rube boomed. "Ed, this is Virginia Turner. She's been living with us since they've had her brother in jail."

Ed's first thought was that Rube should have warned him. Rube had deliberately held this back as a surprise, and for what purpose Ed could easily guess. Then the girl's firm brown hand was in his and she was saying, "I'm glad to meet you, Ed. I've heard so much about you."

"And all of it exaggerated, I'll bet," Ed replied. "Rube didn't tell me you were here."

"Your folks have been so kind, I'll never be able to repay them," Virginia said.

Ed became aware that he was holding her hand longer than was necessary, and he dropped it. "I'll never be able to repay them for what they've done for me, either," he said.

"You just get Virginia's brother acquitted and it'll take care of everything," his mother said.

Ed wished desperately that the thing hadn't come up so soon, but there was no point in letting them believe he could do a thing when he couldn't. He said, "Rube has been talking to me about that, and I've explained to him that it wouldn't be fair to trust the case to an inexperienced lawyer. I just can't take the case, Mom."

He saw disbelief in his mother's face, and tragic disappointment in Virginia's.

"Son, you can't mean that," his mother said.

"Yes, I do. What chance would I have against a wily attorney like Ern Willmore?"

"But we've counted on it so much," Mrs. Dawson said.

"What's really holding him back," Rube said, "is that he's afraid of what Cletus Curry may do to us if we tangle with him."

"And he's dead right," Win Dawson said unexpectedly. "Cletus Curry could smash us and you know it."

Tears sprang into Virginia's eyes. "I hadn't thought of that," she said.

"Just this girl living here with us is enough to make him cause trouble," Dawson declared.

Virginia said, "If I'd only thought of that I wouldn't have come here. I'm terribly sorry. I'll leave at once."

Rube's big arm went around her shoulder. "Not on your life you won't," he said. "Cletus Curry still isn't big enough to say who we'll have in our own house. You're staying right here."

Ed could find no words. He had always thought of Rube as a confirmed old bachelor. Rube would take in anyone in trouble, but was it possible, Ed wondered, that he was in love with this girl? Rube deserved a good wife if any man did, and this girl would make one of whom a man could be proud.

"Rube is right, Virginia," Mrs. Dawson said. "You stay right here. If old Cletus could have smashed us, we'd have been smashed long ago. The good Lord knows he's tried hard enough."

This is different," Dawson said stubbornly. "Everybody knows how wrapped up he was in that worthless Earl. And Ed wouldn't have a chance against Sherm Parkin, let alone Ern Willmore. Why, if Ed took that case, he'd never get another client in Wah Wah county if he stayed here the rest of his life."

"Now, Dad—" Rube began.

Virginia cut him of. "I can see now that Mr. Dawson is right. If I had been thinking of anything but Harley, I'd have realized it. I'll move into town tomorrow. I can't make trouble for you folks on account of my brother."

Rube was angry at his father, and per-

haps some of it spilled over against Ed. His face was red, but there was a determined set to his jaw.

Then Mrs. Dawson said, "We'll discuss it later. Right now dinner is ready and I want everybody to enjoy themselves. I want Ed to tell us everything that's happened to him since he's been away."

"There hasn't been much," Ed said. "What with study, and waiting on tables in my spare time, and working during vacations, I didn't have time to see much of the world."

"It'll be different now," his mother predicted confidently. "You're going to be a great success."

ALTHOUGH Mrs. Dawson tried hard to brighten up the conversation, the dinner was a failure. Ed knew that his mother must have planned that dinner days ahead, and it was probably the best meal the family had had in years. Now it was being spoiled.

After dinner Rube said, "It's a little late, but would you like to ride over the ranch, Ed?"

"Not tonight," Ed refused. "I'd like to have a talk with Miss Turner."

"Why, sure," Mrs. Dawson said. "You just go into the front room and nobody will bother you."

It was going to be an ordeal, but Ed hated putting anything off. "Please sit down, Miss Turner," he said when they were alone. "I'd like to make you understand that it's in your brother's interest that I have to decline the case."

Virginia said, "I understand that. But it was wrong of me to come here. I had no money and I was pretty desperate. Your mother is so wonderful, and Rube is the kindest, gentlest man I've ever known, so I didn't stop to think what I might be doing to them. You and your father are right."

"But I don't want you to leave here," Ed told her. "If you had no money then, you haven't any now. Cletus Curry will be going too far if he tries to say who we may have in our own house."

"But I know how powerful he is, and how vindictive," Virginia said. "I can see now that no one can afford to offend him by befriending us."

"But it isn't that—"

"It would ruin your career if you were to help Harley. Curry is determined to have him hanged if it ruins everybody in the county."

"You're sure your brother is innocent?" Ed asked. "I've been tempted to plant a bullet in Earl a few times myself."

"I know he is," she asserted vehemently. "My brother wouldn't lie to me. He was foolish to go out to the ranch and quarrel with Earl, but if he had been going to kill him, he'd have done it then."

"Rube said something about some horse tracks."

"I know. Either Sheriff Lewis lied—which wouldn't surprise me, since he owes his office to Cletus—or the real murderer stole Harley's horse out of the pasture and rode it. They claim that Lewis had a photographer take pictures of the horse tracks," she explained.

"It looks bad," Ed admitted.

Virginia said, "We think the only chance Harley has is to prove that Cletus Curry stole our mother's money, and maybe that wouldn't help."

"How could he have done it?"

"It was easy. Mother trusted him with it because he was such a successful man, and her husband. He promised to invest it for her. The records show that she made out a check on her own bank for thirty thousand dollars, and deposited it in the Copperton bank, of which Curry is the largest stockholder. Then she drew the money out in cash. We think she gave it to Curry, but he denies it and claims she must have given it to me and Harley," Virginia explained.

"But why would she draw it out in cash?"

"We don't know. She never told us that she had, but she did tell us that Cletus had invested it in mining property. We didn't like it, but she insisted that Cletus knew what he was doing and that it would make much larger returns than an ordinary investment. She told us he had invested a

lot of his own money in the same property. Finally, she began to get suspicious herself, but right after that she was killed," Virginia said. Her voice broke a little, but evidently she had schooled herself to speak disspassionately about her troubles.

"Tell me," Ed said, "do you think Cletus Curry murdered your mother?"

"It never occurred to us at the time, but it did when we asked for an accounting and he denied flatly that Mother had ever given him a cent."

"What I can't understand is why a man as well off as Curry would steal money and resort to murder to cover it up," Ed said. He knew how greedy the big cattleman was, but he couldn't think that even Cletus would take such a chance.

"I think that was the only reason he ever married Mother," Virginia said grimly.

"I'm truly sorry," Ed said. "I only wish there were something I could do, but I can't. I just want to beg you not to leave here."

She said, "I can't stay, knowing what he would do to your family. We got Harley's preliminary hearing postponed until day after tomorrow because Rube was so sure you would take the case. I'll stay here until then, but after the hearing I'll arrange to stay somewhere else."

They rejoined the others, and Ed had to shake his head in answer to Rube's anxious, questioning look. This was poor payment for all Rube's years of sacrifice, to refuse the first request Rube made. But, still, Ed was sure that it wouldn't be fair to Rube, to his parents, or to Virginia and her brother.

NEXT day Ed rode into Copperton on his old saddle horse, Pedro, to arrange for his practice. Most of his things had been sent on ahead. He found them in his room at a boarding-house, where Rube had already paid a month's rent in advance. He had known Mrs. Queen, his landlady, all his life, and she gave him a warm welcome.

He opened his trunk, dug out the shingle he had had made in the East, and hung it up over the stairway leading from the street to his office. He couldn't restrain a feeling of pride as he looked at it. It represented the culmination of ten years of hard struggle.

He was still standing there when Sherm Parkin came out of the bank. "So we have a new attorney in Copperton," Sherm said. "Let me be the first to congratulate you."

"Thanks," Ed said, as he accepted the limp, fish-cold hand of the county attorney. He had never known Parkin very well and he certainly didn't like him. But Parkin, too, had had his struggle to get where he was.

Parkin was only a few years older than Ed, but he had been practising law about five years. He had come to Copperton as a schoolteacher but had quit after the first term to work in the bank controlled by Cletus Curry. He had studied law at home and while working in Ernest Willmore's law office, and after a single year at a law college had been admitted to the bar. Almost at once he had been elected county attorney.

Parkin was a tall, slender man with a great nose and a prominent Adam's apple. His squirrel-teeth made his mouth purse up, and he had a high, squeaky voice. Ed had always thought Parkin was a man who would sell his soul for even a small measure of success.

Ed could do nothing but invite the attorney up to his office. He had been proud of that office a few minutes before, but Parkin's half-contemptuous stare as he looked around made the room seem small and shabby.

"Not much of a library," Parkin said. "I suppose most of your books are in your inner office."

"This is the inner office," Ed said a bit grimly.

"I understand that you and I are going to cross blades in your very first case," Parkin said. "That's too bad, because you won't have a chance."

"I wasn't aware that we were," Ed said coldly.

"Why, I understood that you had been retained to defend young Turner."

"You're mistaken. I'm not handling the case."

Ed thought there was a shade of disappointment on Parkin's face, but the man said, "It's just as well. He's guilty as all hell, and he's certainly going to swing."

"If it's as easy as all that why was Ernest Willmore hired to help you prosecute?" Ed queried.

"I didn't request help. Mr. Curry just wanted to make sure that young Turner hangs. It was a cowardly, cold-blooded murder, and you can't blame Mr. Curry for being bitter—Earl was his only son."

"I guess there were plenty of other people who hated Earl enough to kill him," Ed said.

"But none of them did," Parkin shot back. "So far as I know Earl Curry was a fine man."

"He was a louse," Ed said.

Parkin said, "Well, I hope you won't starve to death before you get any clients." With a nasal laugh he went down the stairs.

Having much to do, Ed remained in town that night. But he was at the small courthouse before ten the next morning, ostensibly to pay his respects to the judge but actually to see what happened when young Harley Turner was arraigned.

He found Judge Elmer Bray in his chambers, and he had the feeling that the judge's last name suited him exactly. He looked and acted like a mule and he had a reputation for stubbornness and many claimed, stupidity.

Ever since he was a boy Ed had seen the judge around, but this was the first time they had ever spoken.

"So you're the Dawson kid who decided to become a lawyer," Bray said. "Well, we need a few more lawyers in this county. If you don't get out of line you ought to do fairly well."

"What do you mean, get out of line?" Ed demanded.

"I mean don't antagonize the wrong people," Bray shot back.

It was on Ed's tongue to state that justice was supposed to be impartial, but he bit back the words. Since Bray was the man before whom he would have to try his cases, if any, he couldn't afford to start off by making an enemy of the man.

He said, "I know you're a busy man, Judge, so I won't take any more of your time."

"Just pattern youself after Ern Willmore, and you'll be all right," Bray dismissed him.

RUBE and Virginia were just riding up when Ed went out. In her riding clothes the girl looked boyishly slim. Rube had already told him that Virginia was twenty-two. Rube was thirty-three. Virginia's face showed the strain she was under, and Rube looked grim. They got off their horses and stood talking with Ed.

Already a crowd was gathering in the courtroom, for this was the most sensational trial Wah Wah County ever had.

"Haven't changed your mind yet, boy?" Rube asked hopefully.

"No. If you'll take my advice, though, Miss Turner, you'll have your brother ask for a change of venue to another county. He won't get a fair trial here anyway, and another judge would have to appoint counsel."

Virginia nodded, and they moved toward the courthouse steps. At that moment Cletus Curry dismounted on the other side of the walk. With him were the two Texas gunmen Ed had seen the day he arrived, and Bill Hurd, the hard-boiled foreman of the C Bar C. The two parties almost collided at the walk.

Neither side spoke, but Curry gave Virginia a glance that fairly sizzled with hate. Ed saw Bill Hurd sizing him up. They had known each other for years, but the middle-aged Hurd had never been friendly with the Dawson boys.

The Dawsons and Virginia dropped back and let the Curry party enter the courtroom ahead of them. The rather small building was already packed, but some men got up to let Curry and his friends have a bench just outside the railing.

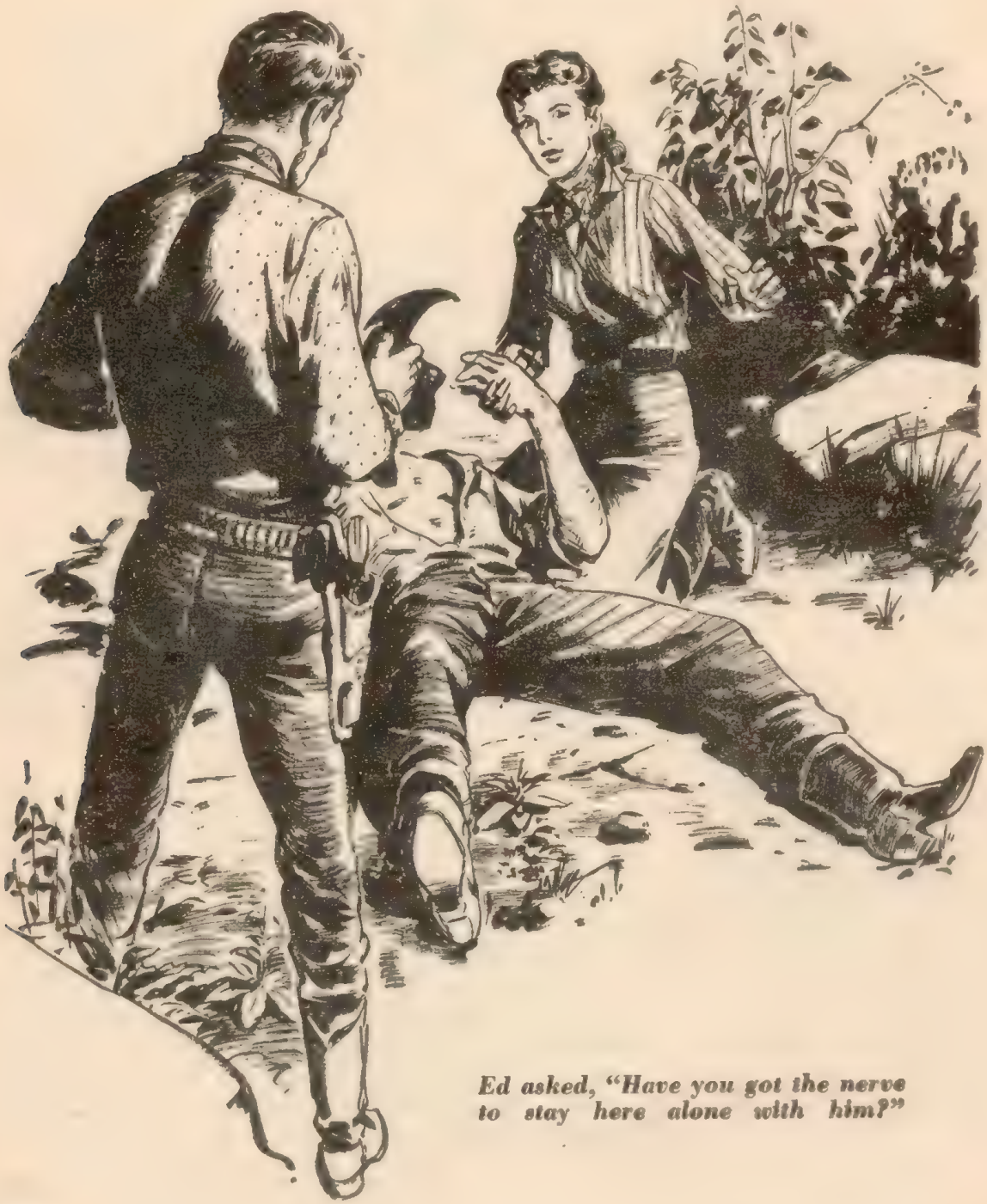
"There are seats inside the railing, and you're entitled to be there," Rube said to Virginia. "Ed and I will stand here."

The girl went on with her head high, ignoring the sudden buzz of conversation and the curious stares.

"What a girl," Rube murmured.

Virginia was scarcely seated when a deputy sheriff came in with the prisoner, a slim, dark youth of twenty. Virginia went over to him, and Ed saw the boy smile as he embraced his sister. Virginia had to choke back a sob, but their faces were expressionless as they sat down together and Virginia began to whisper to Harley.

A minute later everyone stood up as Judge Bray entered the room. Ed had seen the top of Sherm Parkin's head, but now



Ed asked, "Have you got the nerve to stay here alone with him?"

for the first time he saw Ernest Willmore, a stubby little man not more than five feet tall with a face as sharp as a fox's.

The preliminaries were brief. Then Bray asked, "Is the defendant represented by counsel?"

"I am not," Harley answered in a clear voice. "I demand a change of venue to another county."

"Motion denied," Bray said. "Defendant has had ample time to engage counsel. If you won't select your own attorney, it is the duty of this court to appoint counsel. I won't allow this case to be dragged out."

"I've got no money to pay a lawyer," Harley said.

"That's a lie!" Cletus Curry roared out.

"Order in the court," Bray shouted. "Mr. Curry, if you make another outburst like that I'll have to have you removed."

"That's to show how impartial the judge is," Rube said bitterly.

"I apologize," Cletus said.

"If the defendant pleads that he is a pauper, this court will have to appoint counsel," Bray said caustically. "I see that we have a new member of the bar present in the court, so I hereby appoint Attorney Edward Dawson as counsel for the defendant."

Ed was taken completely by surprise, but he knew it was his legal duty to accept the appointment. He could ask the judge for permission to withdraw, but it would be a cowardly thing to do.

"Get up there, boy, you can't crawl out now," Rube said, satisfaction warming his voice.

Ed walked slowly up the aisle, realizing that the life of a man was now in his inexperienced hands. Suddenly he knew why he had been appointed. Judge Bray took his orders from Cletus Curry and Ern Willmore. With him acting as attorney for the defense, they felt that they had no reason to fear an acquittal.

AS Ed walked past the Curry party he heard Bill Hurd say clearly, "Pretty clever trick to make the state pay their lawyer." Ed's lips compressed, but he looked straight ahead.

Virginia said, "Harley, this is Ed Dawson." Ed shook hands with the boy and sat down beside him. He liked Harley Dawson's looks.

"Thought Virginia said you wouldn't take the case," Harley said.

"I couldn't do it voluntarily, but this is different. I still hope to get a better lawyer for you," Ed said.

"Case will proceed," Bray said. "Is the prosecution ready?"

"We are ready, your honor," Sherm Parkin said.

"Is the defense ready?"

"We are not, your honor, and I ask for a postponement," Ed said.

"Motion denied. This is only a preliminary hearing. I see no reason for delay."

"Your Honor, I want to repeat our motion for a change of venue," Ed said.

"Motion again denied. The prosecution will proceed," Bray dictated.

"Exception," Ed said.

"Granted."

Suddenly Ed's timidity left him. He was trying his first case, and he was angry. They didn't intend giving young Turner a fair trial, and he meant to fight them every foot of the way.

The State's case proceeded smoothly.

The coroner testified that Earl Curry had been killed by a rifle bullet fired into his side. Sheriff Al Lewis told where the body had been found and stated that he had found where the murderer had been hidden, within forty feet of where Earl had had to open a gate. He had found where a horse had been left, several hundred yards farther out.

"You examined the horse tracks?" Parkin asked.

"They were plain as print. I got a photographer to take a picture of them. They were still plain when I brought Harley Turner's horse out there the next day. They matched," the sheriff said. "Pictures match, too. Here they are."

The pictures were accepted as Exhibit A.

Finally Cletus Curry took the stand. He admitted that the Turners were his stepchildren. Ed objected to his stating that they had always been quarrelsome and ungrateful, and to his surprise the objection was sustained. Curry related that Harley had come out to the ranch the day before the murder. "He tried to blackmail me," Cletus stated.

Ed objected and was overruled.

"Did the defendant make threats against your life?" Parkin prompted.

"He threatened to kill both me and Earl. That's when Earl beat him up," Curry said.

"Your witness," Parkin smirked.

Ed said, "Mr. Curry, isn't it a fact that you owe the defendant and his sister thirty thousand dollars which you refuse to account for?"

"It's a lie!" Curry roared, his face mottled with anger.

Ern Willmore was on his feet shouting, "Objection. Mr. Curry is not on trial."

"Objection sustained," Bray said hurriedly.

"Exception," Ed said grimly.

Ed recalled the sheriff. "You say you took photographs of the defendant's horse's tracks. Did you also take pictures of the killer's tracks?"

"No, he had scuffed them out," Lewis said.

"Yet the horse was three hundred yards from where you say the killer stood. Is it possible he could have walked all that distance and got on his horse without leaving any tracks at all?"

"All I can say is he did," the sheriff said, and got a laugh from the audience.

Ed said, "That will be all."

"The prosecution rests," Parkin said.

"The defense asks for a dismissal on grounds of lack of evidence to connect the defendant with the crime," Ed said.

"Motion denied," Bray said shortly. "You want to present any testimony?"

"In view of the court's attitude it would be a waste of time," Ed said curtly.

BRAY'S face was red with anger. "Young man, I could hold you in contempt of court for that. On account of your inexperience however, I'll let it go this time. Don't let it happen again. The defendant is remanded for trial for first degree murder, and I fix the date twenty days from this date, on the twenty-third of May."

"Your Honor, that isn't enough time," Ed protested.

"If that's a motion for more delay, it is denied," Bray ruled.

"Exception," Ed said.

"Court is dismissed."

"Well, they sure mean to railroad me in a hurry, don't they?" Harley said bitterly.

"Just remember this," Ed said. "The more unfair they are the better grounds we'll have for an appeal."

Harley was taken away, and Ed and Virginia joined Rube in the back of the room. They waited until the crowd had filed out. Just outside the door they found Cletus Curry waiting, with Bill Hurd and the two gunmen.

"Look here, young fellow," Cletus grated, "if you know what's good for you, you won't be trying to make me out a crook."

"Meaning what, Mr. Curry?" Ed said.

"Meaning for you to stop claiming I stole the money that this girl and her mangy brother stole themselves. Don't try

dragging that into the trial," Curry threatened.

The man was such a despot and had had his way in Wah Wah County so long that he actually believed he could say what evidence could or could not be introduced.

Ed said, "Get one thing straight, Mr. Curry. As long as I'm connected with this case I'll introduce any evidence that I think will help my client. If I find evidence that indicates that you murdered your wife, I'll introduce that, too."

"Why, you damned poverty-stricken upstart!" Curry bellowed, and took a mighty swing at Ed's jaw.

Curry couldn't know that Ed had kept himself physically fit by boxing in his college gymnasium. Ed let the blow slide over his shoulder as he crouched, and then his left hooked into the big rancher's stomach, momentarily paralyzing the cattleman, and his right whizzed to the jaw. For the first time in the history of Wah Wah County Cletus Curry found himself knocked down by an opponent; not only knocked down, but knocked out.

Virginia gave a little scream as Latigo Gordon and Jock Smalley went for their guns. But, before they could draw, Rube's mighty arms shot around their necks and their heads crashed together. Both men dropped flat on the seat of their pants, too badly hurt even to think about their guns.

Bill Hurd hadn't moved, but he was amazed at the sudden turn of events. Then he said coldly, "That was the biggest mistake you Dawsons ever made."

"Come on," Rube said, and with Virginia between them the Dawson brothers moved down the walk. They didn't look back, though they knew they were candidates for a back-shooting.

Ed said, "Well, I guess I finished the Dawsons. I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"I'm proud of you, boy," Rube said. "What a shock! You never learned to box like that in this country."

"It was all my fault," Virginia said contritely. "I never should have dragged you folks into this mess."

"Don't talk like that," Rube scolded. "It's time somebody stood up to old Cletus, and we've got just the boy that can do it." Rube slapped his brother fondly on the shoulder.

Rube, Ed thought, was the one who had all the courage. He himself had done his best to evade the issue. Rube was the one who could be hurt most, and Rube was wise enough to know it, yet he hadn't faltered. Rube was a courageous man, but it must have taken something more than a love for justice to cause himself to risk his future and the welfare of the parents he worshiped. It could only be, Ed thought, that he was in love with Virginia.

"Where's Pedro?" Rube asked. "You're going home with us, of course."

"Just as well, I guess," Ed said. "I won't get any clients in Copperton after this."

Virginia said, "I can't impose on you folks any more. I must try to get someplace here to stay."

"We won't hear of it," Rube vetoed. "Why, I'm ashamed of myself for not paying you wages, the way you help Mom."

"I know that isn't true, but it's so nice of you to say it that I won't argue," the girl gave in.

Ed saddled Pedro and joined them. Going home, they talked about the case, and Ed had to tell Virginia frankly that the only hope for Harley depended upon one of three things. Either they must find the real murderer, prove that Cletus Curry had indeed murdered his wife, or establish the fact that he had stolen the thirty thousand dollars. So far as Ed could see, there was little or no chance of proving any of those things.

THEY agreed among themselves not to mention the clash with Curry and his gunmen to the old folks. Mrs. Dawson was pleased that Ed had taken the case; her husband was not.

As soon as possible Ed had a private talk with Rube. He said, "They wanted me to defend Harley because they figured I wouldn't dare make a real defense, even if I were able. Now that they know I won't lay down, Cletus is sure to start a range

war against you. How are you fixed?"

"You use the wrong pronoun," Rube said. "Against *us*. You're as much a partner in the ranch as I am."

"After all you've done for me? I should say not," Ed said. "Can you stand a range war?"

"I don't know," Rube confessed. "We're in debt—a lot more than the folks know, even if everything is still in their name. I'm running about six hundred head of cattle. Cletus has grabbed more and more of our range. About all we've got left is the triangle between Portneuf and Poison Creeks. If we can't hold that I don't know what we'll do."

"It's those gunmen I'm afraid of," Ed said. "You're too doggoned big a target."

"You're not so small yourself," Rube grinned.

"Rube, we've got to find out who killed Earl—if Harley didn't."

"You still think Harley might have done it. I don't. Earl had a lot of enemies. The last few years he got worse, gambling and raising hell all over the country. He must have cost Cletus a lot of trouble and a lot of money, but so far as Cletus was concerned Earl could never do anything wrong. I suspect there are a dozen men, maybe a lot more, who would have been glad to put a bullet in him."

"It's not much of a start, but I've got to find out which of his enemies were in town that night. Any suggestions?"

"First off I'd name Lee Stroud. Cletus broke the Strouds when they ran cattle. Lee tends bar in Copperton and hates the Currys' guts. Then there's a fellow named Jim McArthur. There was a lot of talk about Earl playing around with Jim's wife. Also, I've heard that there's a saloonkeeper over in Arimo by the name of Dutch Kopp who had Earl too scared to go back to that town. Seems Earl welshed on a bet, and this Kopp is a big operator and plenty tough," Rube said.

"They all sound like possibles," Ed said. "Now tell me what you think about that thirty thousand dollars."

Rube replied, "I'll stake my life Virginia and Harley are telling the truth. Cletus got that money, and I think he murdered his wife. I've been up to that ledge. It's a cliff really, with a trail running over the top of it. It's plenty wide for two horses. Mrs. Curry wasn't a horsewoman, so she was riding a gentle horse. Why would it suddenly act up at that particular place?"

"It looks as if he might have killed her, but there's no proof that he did," Ed said. "I wish I could stay on the ranch to help you, but I've got to follow those leads."

Except for the threat that hung over them all, Ed could have enjoyed that evening. His mother was so pleased to have him at home that she wanted to wait on him hand and foot. It was hard for him to keep his eyes off Virginia, and the thought came to him how easy it would be to fall in love with her. He thrust the idea from his mind. If she was going to marry a Dawson, it would be Rube. Certainly Rube deserved that happiness.

He rode Pedro back to town the next day, and went to his office to study up on murder trials. He hadn't been there long before there was a knock on the door, and Ern Willmore entered. The prosperous little lawyer was about the last person Ed expected to see.

Willmore said, "You made a big mistake when you struck Cletus Curry yesterday."

"He made a bigger one when he ordered me to exclude any evidence that might reflect on him," Ed retorted.

"Granted. But his son was murdered in cold blood and he feels strongly. Young Turner is going to be convicted and hanged. There's not a doubt about that. You would be very foolish to ruin your career before it is started by dragging Mr. Curry's name in the mud—or that of his son," Willmore said sternly.

"There are other places to practise law," Ed reminded.

WILLMORE shook his head. "Not for a debarred attorney, and I'm warning you I have influence enough to get you debarred if you bring unfounded charges against my client," he said.

"So you are demanding that I betray *my*

client, or you will ruin me and Curry will ruin my parents and my brother. That's about the size of it, isn't it, Willmore?"

"I can still persuade Mr. Curry not to molest your brother if I get your promise to cooperate with us in this case," Willmore said stolidly.

"My answer to that, Mr. Willmore, is for you to get out of my office and stay out," Ed said evenly. "You are a disgrace to our profession."

"You'll regret that remark as you'll never regret anything else in your life," Willmore said furiously.

Ed's face remained white with anger for half an hour after his visitor left. Then he grabbed his hat and went out. There was no point in poring over law books. He had to get out and find evidence that would clear Harley Turner.

He went over to the Buffalo Bar and ordered a drink from Lee Stroud, a tall, saturnine man, sparing of speech. Stroud had been a horseman; he might have been the one who had ridden Turner's horse.

"Like to ask you a few questions, Lee," Ed said. "Did you see Earl Curry the night he was killed?"

"Sure I saw him. He was in here drunker than a muleskinner on pay day. He got his load somewhere else though. I ordered him out."

"Who was with him?"

"Let me see. Oh, yes, it was Jim McArthur."

"McArthur? Isn't he the fellow whose wife Earl was carrying on with?"

"I've heard that," Stroud said tonelessly. "Whatever differences they had were made up some time ago, though. McArthur has just built himself a new house and seems to have plenty of money."

The implication was clear. Earl Curry had bought the man off.

"Thanks, Lee," Ed said.

"Look, it's none of my business, but you know what Cletus Curry did to us Strouds," the bartender said. "Your brother isn't half as strong as we were. Better lay off Cletus."

Ed waited until evening before calling on

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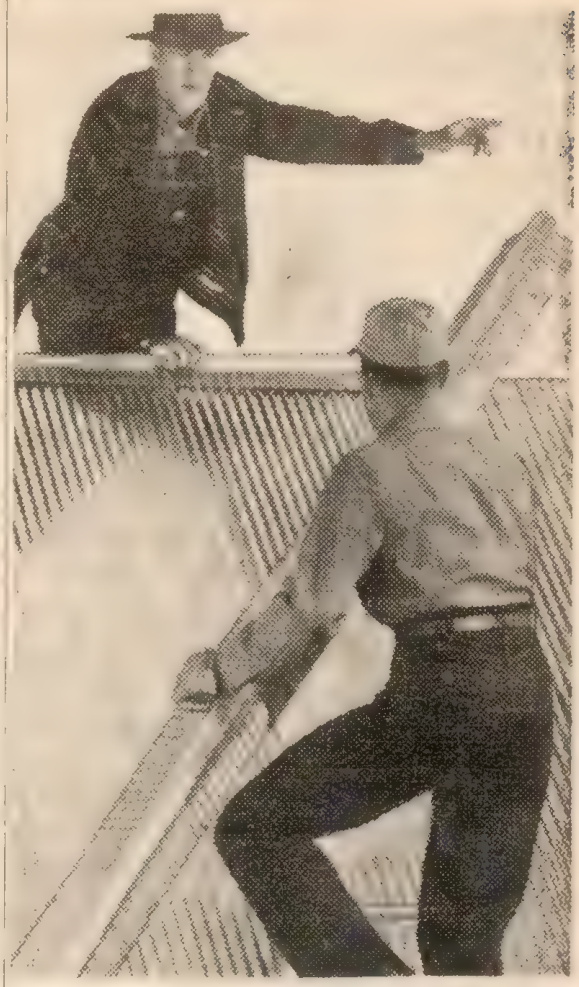

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the McArthurs. The house was large for Copperton, and still smelled of new wood and fresh paint.

The woman who opened the door was plumply pretty, but her bushy red hair was uncombed and her dress was soiled.

"Well, what do you want?" she challenged.

"May I come in? I want to ask your husband some questions."

"About what?"

"The Turner murder case. I'm Mr. Turner's attorney."

"He don't know nothing about that," the woman said.

"It might be better for him to talk to me now than be called as a witness without knowing what he'll be asked," Ed pointed out.

"All right, I guess. Come on in."

McArthur was in his sock feet reading a paper. He was an undersized man with a brown beard and a weak, petulant mouth.

"This is Harley Turner's lawyer and he wants to talk to you," Mrs. McArthur said.

"What do you want to talk to me for?" the man snapped. "I don't even know young Turner."

"But you knew Earl Curry pretty well," Ed said. They didn't invite him to sit down, so he found a chair for himself.

"What of it? Everybody in Copperton knew Earl."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. McArthur?"

"I'm a carpenter—if it's any of your business," the man said.

"I suppose that accounts for your having such a nice house," Ed said quietly. "Build it yourself?"

"What's our house got to do with you?" the woman flared.

"Did your husband build it?"

"Of course I didn't," McArthur said. "I work for the contractor who did. Now state your business and get out of here. I don't want to get mixed up in that murder business."

"You were with Earl the night he was murdered. How long were you with him, whom did he see, and what time did you leave him?" Ed shot out.

McARTHUR glared a moment, then demanded angrily, "Who said I was with him?"

"Lee Stroud for one. Doubtless there were others."

"Well, I had a couple of drinks with him," McArthur admitted. "We got ordered out of the Buffalo, he went back to the Mercury Saloon, and I went home. That satisfy you?"

"Not exactly. I'd still like to know where you got the money to build this house," Ed insisted.

"Throw him out, Jim," the woman cried shrilly.

"What are you driving at, mister?" McArthur demanded.

"I want to find out who hated Earl Curry enough to kill him. I happen to know how blackmailers work. They never give up. When their victim refuses to be bled any more, they sometimes resort to murder," Ed said coolly.

"Are you accusing me of killing Earl Curry?" McArthur cried angrily.

"Not yet. But if you were blackmailing him on account of his friendship with your wife, you might have," Ed said evenly. "The best way to clear yourself is to tell me where you got the money to build this house."

McArthur sprang to his feet. "Damn you, I don't have to take that from anybody," he snarled.

"Hit him, Jim! Hit him!" the woman screamed.

Ed, too, was on his feet, a grim smile on his face. He said, "Then you won't tell me where you got the money. I'll see what we can do about it when I get you on the witness stand."

The woman was still screaming curses at him when he reached the door, but McArthur only stood and trembled. Ed let himself out and closed the door behind him, but a moment later he turned the knob and opened the door perhaps two inches. They hadn't noticed.

"Now, you slut, see what you've let me in for," he heard McArthur say furiously. "I ought to black both your eyes, like I did before."

"You let him get away with it," the woman said. "What are you, a frightened mouse?"

"Shut up."

"Hey, maybe you did kill Earl," the woman charged hysterically. "You contemptible little runt, Earl was worth a dozen of you. If you'd been a man you wouldn't have sold your wife."

"That's right. I should have told him to take you," the goaded McArthur yelled. "And you know he wouldn't have done it. He was through with you."

Ed closed the door softly and walked on to his boardinghouse. His questioning had been more profitable than he had hoped. There was a possibility that McArthur had murdered Earl when his demands for more money were not met, but somehow he didn't think so. Yet somewhere here there was a clue that might lead to what he was seeking. . . .

Ed had a long talk with Harley Turner next morning, but the boy could tell him little that he didn't already know. Harley realized now that he had been foolish to ride out to the ranch at all, but he had been burned up because the Currys were claiming that he and his sister had stolen their mother's money.

He had been even more foolish to tackle Earl Curry, a man who would outweigh him by fifty pounds. He had been given such a beating that he had gone to bed as soon as he reached home, and hadn't gotten up until the sheriff accused him of murder the next day.

"Nobody's ever stopped old Cletus in his life, so I suppose I'll hang," Harley said despondently.

"Don't be discouraged," Ed said. "We can always appeal, and I'm sure we'll get a change of venue for a second trial. And there may be a chance to find out who really did kill Earl."

Knowing there weren't likely to be any clients seeking his services, Ed rode out to the ranch that afternoon. Rube was working on the range. Ed talked to Virginia, but he didn't tell her what he had learned. There was no point in raising false hopes in her.

WHEN Rube returned, Ed noticed a gash on the shoulder of his horse. "Isn't that a bullet track?" he asked quickly.

"Right. Somebody took a shot at me," Rube answered. "It was long range and his bullet dropped more than he thought."

"You didn't see who it was?"

"Nope. Too many hills. Probably one of those Texans," Rube said. "We won't tell Virginia and the folks. If anybody else notices this, it's a wire cut."

Ed had foreseen that something like this might happen, but he hadn't anticipated it so soon. He burned with white-hot anger that anyone should try to murder a man as gentle and generous and kind as Rube. Always Rube had done things for him. It was time now for him to do something for Rube, but what he could do Ed didn't know.

Ed told Rube about his interviews with Lee Stroud and the McArthurs. Rube said, "By golly, you're getting things done."

"I wish I were," Ed said. "I think we are on the trail of something, though I don't know where it may lead. Earl Curry was paying blackmail to Jim McArthur. You say he defaulted on a gambling debt to Dutch Kopp. Doesn't it strike you that he must have lost a lot of money in gambling before he began to renege on his payments? You know how he used to like to fling money around."

"You mean he may have gotten in so bad that Cletus had to have the Turners' money to pay Earl's debts?" Rube said eagerly.

"I think so. Not only that, but it looks to me as if Cletus may be a lot nearer broke than people imagine. You know he'd dig up for Earl as long as he could raise a dollar."

"He certainly would," Rube agreed. "Earl was the only thing in the world he ever cared for. He'd lie, steal or commit murder for that worthless bum, and it looks like he did."

"But we've got to prove it," Ed said. "And if he's as broke as we think, you can bet your last dollar he's going to try to take over our property just as quick as he can.

That's why you've got to be careful, Rube. You've got other people to think of, so don't get yourself killed."

They didn't notice that their father had come out till he rolled up in his wheel chair, and said, "Who shot your horse?"

"What do you mean?" Rube asked.

"Don't give me that wire cut yarn," Dawson snapped. "I know a bullet burn when I see it. You tangled with some of Curry's men."

"All right, Dad, one of 'em did take a shot at me, but for heck's sake don't tell Mom and Virginia."

"Why not? They'll find out when we have to bury you," Dawson said grimly. "I tell you I always knew no good could come of Ed's highfalutin idea to be a lawyer. All he'll accomplish is to get you killed and the rest of us driven out of our home."

"Look here, Dad—if anything happens, it'll be my fault, not Ed's," Rube said angrily. "It was me who took up for the Turners, not him."

"If either one of you had any sense, Ed'd drop that case and go somewhere else to starve to death trying to be a lawyer. And you'd send that girl packing and make peace with Cletus Curry," Dawson said loudly.

Never in his life had Ed seen Rube as angry as he was now. His powerful fingers clamped down on his father's shoulders as he ground out, "You keep your voice down. For twenty years you've sat in that chair and objected to everything any of us ever tried to do. You're the one that has kept us poor, because you never let me do the things I wanted to do. Well, I got Ed out from under your thumb, and you're not going to tell him what to do. I've supported you all these years and never once complained about it, but don't you try to tell us what to do now."

There was fear in Dawson's eyes, but he blustered, "This place belongs to me. You haven't got a single thing in your name. You don't own a dollar."

"All right," Rube said, "you take it and run it. If you don't want Virginia here, I'll take her away—and Mom, too, if she wants to go—and I think she will."

Dawson licked at suddenly dry lips. He was frightened, but he hated to back down. "You know I'm a cripple, so you think you can run over me," he said childishly.

Ed was suddenly as mad as Rube had been. He said furiously, "After Rube has taken care of you all these years without ever getting a dollar for himself, you have the nerve to say he has run over you?"

"You're the one got all the benefit," Dawson shot back. "This ranch is supporting you right now."

"Well, it won't support me any longer," Ed said. "I'm leaving."

"Now wait a minute," Rube said placatingly, his anger all gone. "You're both a pair of hotheaded fools. You put in years of hard work here, Ed and you've earned every dollar you ever got. As for you, Dad, you know damned well you can't get along without me, so keep your mouth shut. I won't have Ed insulted or Mom any more scared than she is. You hear me?"

DAWSON turned his chair around and wheeled himself rapidly back to the house.

Rube said, "I guess we can't blame him for being cranky, but you forget about leaving here."

"I can't stay after this," Ed declared. "I'm going back to town." Nor could Rube persuade him to change his mind.

He stayed for supper, but his mother knew there was something wrong. After the meal, he went up to his room to get a few things he wanted, including an old .44 he hadn't used for years. He had come home to practise law, not to wear a gun, but with enemies seeking his brother's life he intended to be armed. It didn't occur to him that his own life might also be in danger.

His mother came up to the room. "What's the matter, Ed?" she asked softly. "Did you and your father quarrel?"

"We had some words. He thinks I've lived off him long enough, and I agree. I'm going back to town."

"Win is a sick man. I think he is sicker in his mind than in his body, son. Try to be patient with him," she pleaded.

"I can't, not when he abuses Rube. He even demanded that Rube send Virginia away. Rube is in love with her, isn't he?"

"Neither of them has said anything to me, but I think Rube is crazy about her. And she certainly couldn't find a better man."

"I'll say she couldn't," Ed agreed.

Ed explained to the others that he had thought of something that was taking him back to town, but even Virginia must have guessed it was more than that. Mr. Dawson sat glumly in his wheel chair and refused to speak to anyone.

Three days later Ed found himself in

Dutch Kopp's saloon in Arimo. This was a much-larger town than Copperton, and he had learned already that, prior to six months ago, Earl Curry had spent a lot of time there and had been no more popular than he had been in Copperton.

He had no difficulty getting Kopp to talk. "Yes, Curry welshed on a twenty-thousand-dollar gambling bet," Kopp admitted. "His getting killed cost me plenty. If he'd lived I'd have got that money out of him some way."

As they talked Ed studied the saloonkeeper carefully. Kopp was a bulldog of a man, who never smiled. Obviously money was the only thing he cared for. Ed was sure that Kopp was capable of murder if anyone really crossed him.

If Kopp were responsible for Earl's death, however, it must have been by proxy, for before leaving Copperton Ed satisfied himself that Kopp hadn't been seen in that town for several months before the murder, when he had come to town to see Earl. The man was well enough known to have been recognized. Furthermore, Ed was sure that whoever had done the killing had been familiar with Earl's movements, had known about the fight between Earl and Harley, and had also known where to find Harley's horse. That couldn't have been Kopp. . . .

Ed did learn that Earl's gambling debts in Arimo had been stupendous over the years, and it confirmed his guess that Cletus Curry might be on the verge of bankruptcy because of them.

Ed's anger toward his father was still such that he couldn't return to the ranch. He was almost broke, he had no clients except Harley Turner, and neither Harley nor his sister was able to pay him. And he couldn't yet collect anything from the state. But he was determined to accept no more money from Rube.

When he returned from Arimo he ap-

plied for a loan at the bank and, as he had anticipated, was turned down cold. The only property he owned was his horse, Pedro, and his saddle. He needed the animal too much to sell him, but he managed to negotiate a seventy-five dollar loan on him and the saddle, from the Copperton livery stable owner. That kept him going.

VIRGINIA came into his office the day after he returned from Arimo. He asked, "How are things going at the ranch?"

"Badly, I'm afraid," she answered. "Rube won't say anything and he won't let me ride with him, but he is gone from dawn till dark and he looks terribly worried. His father says he knows Cletus Curry has moved a lot of cattle onto Rube's range."

That was more than likely. "Rube can take care of himself," Ed assured the girl, wishing he could believe his own words.

"He can't protect himself from a bullet when he can't see the man who fires it," Virginia said. "Oh, Ed, I wish I had never gone out there. I'd give my life if I hadn't."

"Don't say that," he rebuked. "Rube hasn't done a thing he didn't want to do."

"If he is killed, I'll be to blame. And I can't bear to have your mother hurt. I've never known anyone half so sweet and good in all my life as she is. And if Rube isn't killed, I may hurt him worse than any bullet," Virginia cried wildly.

"You couldn't do that, Virginia," Ed said. "Rube loves you."

"I know that." She began to sob. "That —that's why I may hurt him."

"You mean," he exclaimed, "you don't love him?"

"Oh, I do. How could anyone help loving him who knows him? But—but not the way he loves me. I never knew my own father, but if I had I think I would have loved him exactly the way I love Rube," Virginia tried to explain.

"My God!"

Virginia dried her eyes with an inadequate-looking handkerchief. She said, "I'm not the ungrateful wretch you think I am. I'll marry Rube any time he asks me. I couldn't hurt him by refusing, but it would hurt him still more if he ever suspected my real feelings toward him. I'm not a good actress. Sometime I might slip."

Something strange came over Ed then. On Rube's account he had tried hard to keep from thinking about Virginia as a woman, but now, suddenly, he knew that he was in love with her himself; madly, crazily in love with her. If he couldn't have her, he knew that he would never love any other woman.

He said, "Is there another man?"

She looked at him with a pleading look in her hazel eyes and said, "I don't think so; certainly no one that is in love with me."

Her eyes betrayed her, and his betrayed him. Before he knew how it happened his hands were on her shoulders. She stood up, and his arms went around her, and then their lips were pressed hungrily together.

It was a long time before they could break away. Then Ed stumbled blindly to his office chair and covered his face with his hands. "How could I ever have done a thing like that to Rube of all people?" he mumbled.

"It wasn't your fault, it was mine," Virginia said honestly. "I never should have given my feelings away. All I do is bring trouble to the people I love." She came over and rested her hand lightly in his hair.

"You haven't done anything," he said. "You said you would marry Rube. You meant that, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course, if he asks me. And I'll try to be a good wife. I never should have gone out to the ranch, but I was desperate. They wanted to hang Harley, and we had no money and no place to go, and when Rube told me I could stay out there, it looked like the only thing I could do. Then Rube told me you would defend Harley, and you got into our trouble too. And now this!"

"We'd have had trouble with Cletus Curry anyway," he said. "I've found out that Earl practically broke Cletus, so he would have started a range war sooner or later to get our ranch for practically nothing. But it's Rube I'm worried about."

"You just about worship Rube, don't you?" she said softly.

"I have every reason to. I'd give up anything in the world for him—even you."

"I know. We've got to forget that—that anything ever happened between you and me. If Rube asks me, I'll be ready," she said desperately.

"Yes. We'll concentrate on fighting Cletus Curry and clearing your brother," he said. "Now I think we had better go over to the jail and pay Harley a visit. I think I have some news that will cheer him up."

"Oh, I hope so," she cried.

HE COULD tell her now about his talks with Lee Stroud, Jim McArthur and Dutch Kopp.

"That must be it," she said. "For all that Cletus always stuck up for Earl, no matter what, they used to have some violent quarrels about money. That's why he persuaded Mother to draw her money out in cash, and then murdered her when he couldn't account for it. What evil men they both were!"

No matter how hard they tried to be as usual, they acted so embarrassed that even Harley noticed it. "What's the matter with you people?" he demanded. "You act like you were afraid of each other."

Both of them blushed, and Ed kept on talking about the case as if he hadn't heard the remark.

Ed was with Virginia when she got on her pony for the return ride to the ranch. "We've got to get used to this thing," he said earnestly. "We can't give ourselves away to Rube."

"I'll be very careful," she promised. . . .

From the top of the highest promontory between Portneuf and Poison Creeks, Ed saw half a dozen riders drive a small herd of perhaps a hundred cattle out of a canyon and move them swiftly toward the Poison Creek ford. They were on C Bar C land, but they were being driven toward all that remained of the Dawsons' Circle D range.

It was the day after his revealing talk with Virginia, and he had left Copperton at daybreak so as to be on the range early. Already he had noticed several small bands of cattle wearing the Curry brand. The grass was good, and as yet the animals hadn't mixed with the Dawson cattle, though often they were close together.

A mounting rage came over Ed as he compared this trifling corner with the immense graze Cletus Curry already commanded. Against the more than ten thousand head Curry owned, Rube's herd of six hundred was a mere nothing. Yet Curry would never rest until he had taken it over.

Though he scanned the country carefully he saw no sign of Rube, but he knew there were many hidden draws in which he might be riding.

He left the promontory ridge and angled down toward the Poison Creek ford, keeping out of sight of the men with the cattle. He didn't look like a lawyer today. He had found that his old riding clothes still fitted him, and he carried his .44 at his thigh. Though he couldn't afford to waste the cartridges, he had used up a couple of boxes in practice, and all his old skill with a gun had come back to him.

By the time he reached the brushy ford, the Curry men were less than a quarter mile distant. When the first of the cattle reached the ford, he rode out on his side. Seeing a rider in front of them, the wild cattle turned back. While the others tried to head them, Bill Hurd and Latigo Gordon rode up to the ford to see what had stopped them. Less than a hundred feet separated them from Ed when they saw him.

"Hey, what the devil are you doing there?" Hurd yelled.

"What are you doing there?" Ed called back. "You can't drive your cows onto Circle D range."

"Who says we can't?" Hurd challenged.

"I do," Ed defied.

"We'll see about that," Hurd said, and started to turn his horse.

"Hold it," Ed said sharply. "We're talking this over right now. And keep your hand away from that gun, Gordon."

They stopped uncertainly, not believing that Ed had had the temerity to challenge them alone. For all they knew, and they certainly believed it to be true, Rube Daw-

son was lurking somewhere in that brush, probably with a bead on one of them.

"You think you can stop a bunch like I got with me?" Hurd demand.

"I can sure as hell try," Ed retorted. "This is one range Cletus Curry isn't going to steal."

"Yeah?" Hurd blustered doubtfully.

"If you don't think so, try crossing this creek," Ed dared them. He moved his hand boldly until it rested upon the handle of his gun.

Bill Hurd remembered that Ed Dawson had been deadly with a gun when he rode the range, but that wouldn't have stopped him if he had thought Ed was alone.

THE other riders now had the cattle bunched a little way back, but they were waiting for orders. They didn't see Ed, and the cattle were bawling too loud for them to hear anything that was being said.

"Look, Dawson, this is all free grass, and if we want to graze our stuff over there, we're going to," Hurd called.

"It'll take more than a couple of tinhorn gunmen from Texas to bluff us, Hurd," Ed taunted. "If you don't think so, why don't you tell your pet monkey to go for his gun?"

Latigo Gordon was strongly tempted to do just that, but Hurd said something to him and he relaxed. Undoubtedly Hurd believed that if he and Gordon went for their guns he would get a bullet from the unseen Rube.

"You're making a big mistake, Dawson," Hurd said. "If you're smart, you'll sell out to Curry and you'll handle that murder case the way the old man wants it handled."

"I never was very smart about being shoved around by a bunch of back-shooting bullies," Ed answered. "A lot of people know that Curry threatened to kill me if I didn't let Harley Turner be convicted without a fight. If you kill me, they'll know I wouldn't knuckle to Curry."

The remark didn't mean much, but it sounded like something to Hurd, something that might be bad for his employer. And he didn't like his own position.

"How long do you think you can sit there and watch that ford—or all the others?" he bluffed.

"Long enough. One of your pets took a shot at my brother the other day. That's a game two can play, Hurd, and we'll know who to look for. Now make your play or take those cows back where they belong. I'll give you just a minute to make up your minds." Ed delivered his ultimatum.

He had taken the play away from the C Bar C, and Hurd had to make his decision. He was well aware of the Dawsons' reputation for seeing through anything they started, and the risk was too great. Hurd muttered something to Gordon; they turned their horses about and rode back toward the cattle.

"You'd better get them out of rifle range," Ed called after them, and they turned their small herd back the other way. They were just about at long rifle range when they abandoned the cattle and rode back toward the canyon at a fast trot.

Ed himself was surprised that he had won his point so easily, but he knew that hadn't settled the matter by any means. Hurd was right. There were too many other fords to be guarded, even if he and Rube worked day and night.

He was still watching the retreating men, when he heard a sound and, whirling quickly, saw Rube riding up to the ford. He was in time to see the quick look of relief flick across Rube's face.

"When I saw that gang riding away from here I didn't know what to expect," Rube said. "What happened?"

"They were going to shove that bunch of cows across the ford. I happened to be here and I convinced Hurd that you were hiding in the brush with a bead on him," Ed grinned.

"I wish I had been. But see here, Ed, I don't want you tangling with that outfit."

"Why not? You'd have tangled with 'em."

"Yes, but that's my job. Yours is to be a lawyer."

"My job is to help you out whenever I can."

"But why didn't you come to the ranch

and tell me?" Rube demanded. "And how do you expect to get clients when you're riding around here like a common cowhand?"

"I'm no different than I was when I was a common cowhand, Rube," Ed stated. "As for the clients, there won't be any till the Turner case is setttled one way or another."

"Maybe not, but I don't want you mixing into this."

"I've seen a lot of C Bar C stuff on our range already. How do you figure to keep 'em off by yourself?"

"I don't know. Just try to do the best I can. When they throw a bunch in from one side, I just haze 'em across to the other and throw 'em out." Rube smiled rather bleakly.

"But they'll gain on you all the time, and one of these days you're liable to run head-on into a bullet from one of those hardcase Texans."

"I keep my eyes open, and I warned Bill Hurd the other day that I'd shoot any man I caught on our range," Rube said calmly.

"But there are so many of 'em, Rube," Ed contended. "One of these days they'll get you. I've got nothing to do till the trial, unless something else comes up, so I'm going to ride, too."

"I don't like it. But, if you must, I want you to ride from the ranch," Rube said.

"Sorry, Rube. Till Dad changes his attitude I can't stay there. Besides, I've got to be in town every day anyway. Something might come up."

RUBE looked uneasy. "If something doesn't it's going to be tough for Harley Turner. You've got no real evidence against anybody else, have you?" he inquired.

"No, but I know what I'm doing," Ed replied. "I'm going to put Cletus Curry on the witness stand and demand that he make a full financial statement."

"He'll never do it."

"I know he won't," Ed agreed. "And Judge Bray will rule that he doesn't have to. But in view of the fact that so much money is involved, and the meat of the question is who got the thirty thousand dollars, it is relevent. It'll give me all the grounds I need to appeal for a new trial in a different court, and then old Cletus will have to show his books. When he does, I think we'll have him. We can then prove that Earl went through his fortune, and that will give us a chance to establish reasonable doubt by showing that other people had a motive for killing Earl."

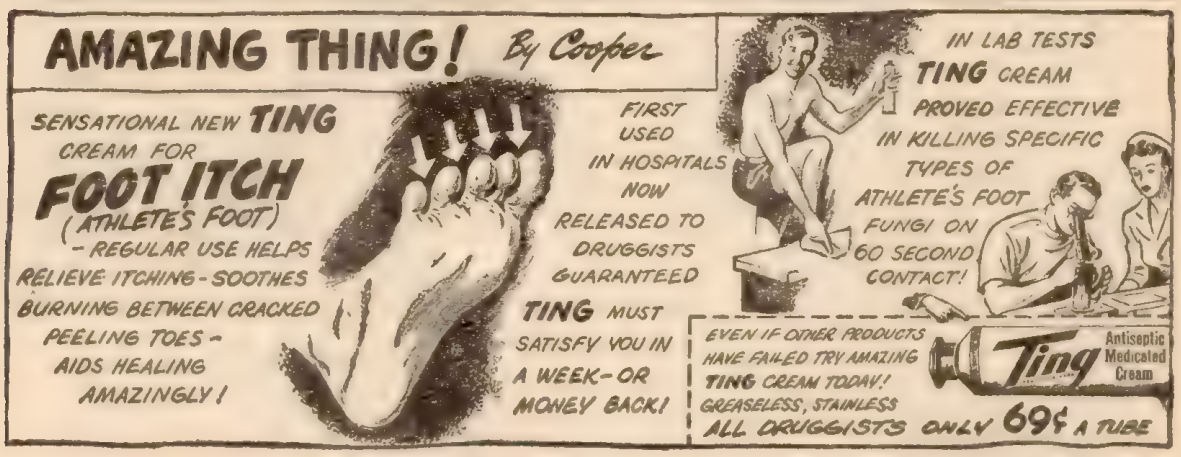
"I always said you'd be a smart lawyer," Rube said admiringly.

"I don't say we'll get an acquittal," Ed said hastily. "But I don't believe any impartial jury will convict Harley without at least a recommendation for mercy. The worst he'll get will be life imprisonment, and some day we may find the murderer."

Rube's face fell, but he said, "Just saving the kid's life will be a tremendous thing. It'll mean as much to Virginia as it does to him."

Ed forced himself to say, "What about

[*Turn page*]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Virginia, Rube? You think a lot of her, don't you?"

"That's right," Rube admitted, uneasy as a bashful schoolboy. "I'm crazy about her, Ed. She's the only woman I ever saw I'd want to marry. But of course she wouldn't ever marry a homely old cuss like me."

"I'll bet my life she would," Ed said. "Why don't you ask her?"

"You think I'd have a chance?" Rube asked so eagerly that Ed felt a lump in his throat.

"I know you have," Ed said. "She practically told me she would marry you." Those were the hardest words he had ever had to say, but he was glad when they were out.

"Gee," Rube murmured. "To think that a fine-looking girl like Virginia could care for an old duffer like me. It's hard to believe."

"You can believe it, all right," Ed said. "Now what do we do about those cows? As soon as we leave, Hurd will probably drive them back."

"Not from where they are he won't," Rube said grimly. "We've got time to haze 'em a good ten miles down the flat. Come on."

Ed had little doubt that they were seen when they left the ford, and he was glad for that. They rounded up the scattered C Bar C cows, got them into a trot, and fogged them a good ten miles from the Circle D line. A jaunt like that did the C Bar C cattle no good whatever.

It was too late to return to the range, so they agreed on a meeting place for the next day and parted with mutual admonitions to be careful.

They rode the range together every day for the next week. Ed knew that his brother hadn't yet screwed up his courage to propose to Virginia, else Rube would have told him. Neither of them mentioned the girl except when they discussed the murder case.

They saw nothing of the C Bar C men, and although they drove C Bar C cattle off their range every day, each morning they found that others had been driven on during the night. They were not holding their own, and they knew that by the middle of July the grass would be getting short. And it would be from then on that their own stuff would need good feed if they were to be fat enough to market in the fall. Cletus Curry was slowly but relentlessly winning the battle. They both knew that something drastic was sure to happen.

Ed had told Rube not to worry if some day he didn't show up on the range. "Something may suddenly come up about the case that I'll have to look into, and that'll be the reason if I'm not out there," he said.

"The case is the important thing," Rube said readily. "Don't let anything interfere with that."

NOW that day had arrived. Ed had dropped into the Buffalo Bar late in the evening after getting back from the range, and Lee Stroud signaled to him. Stroud said, "You know how I feel about the Currys. If that kid did kill Earl, he ought to have a medal, and I'd like to see him get off."

"You know something?" Ed asked eagerly.

"Don't know how important it is, but I thought you ought to know. Ern Willmore is trying to pack the jury on you."

"How do you know that?" Ed asked.

"Know a little rancher out west of town named Ben Vest who's been having a lot of money trouble," Stroud replied. "Curry's bank holds his mortgage and Curry has been pressing him to beat hell. Just happens Vest used to work for us, and we're pretty good friends. He came in here the other night to ask my advice."

"Yes?"

Seems Vest has been called for jury duty. Ern Willmore drove out to see him, and told Vest he wouldn't be pressed for money if he got on the jury and held out for a conviction. Vest is a pretty decent fellow generally, and he came in to ask me what I thought he ought to do," Stroud said.

"Why, that's enough to have Willmore disbarred, if it's true," Ed ejaculated. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him to let his conscience be his guide," Stroud replied. "What else could I tell him? Sure, I said that if it were me I'd tell Willmore where to go. But I'm a single man, and Vest has a lot of kids. He'd lose his home and everything he's got. And, as he says, young Turner will be convicted anyway, so why not get what he can out of it?"

"I appreciate your telling me this, Lee, and I'll ride out and see him tomorrow," Ed said.

He remembered Vest only vaguely, but he knew where his place was and rode out to see him next morning. He had been shocked by Stroud's story of attempted jury tampering. He had been taught that only an occasional blackleg scalawag of the legal profession would resort to such tactics, and Attorney Willmore's reputation seemed too good for him to risk his career by such an action. But he wasn't too much surprised when he thought it over.

Cletus Curry had ordered a conviction at all cost. Having failed to force Ed to betray his client, his opponents were making sure by hand-picking a jury, a thing they were powerful enough to do in Wah Wah County. Old Cletus was powerful enough to force Willmore to do his bidding, if force were necessary. Ed doubted that it was.

Lee Stroud had told him something else. "If that kid is convicted, I have my doubts Cletus will let him be legally executed." His meaning was clear. Harley Turner would be lynched.

Vest had gone into the timber for a load of poles, and it was nearly noon when Ed located the man. Vest shook hands, said he was glad Ed had achieved his ambition to become a lawyer, but he was nervous and uneasy.

Ed came quickly to the point. He said, "I've heard that Ern Willmore has promised to take care of your mortgage if you get on the jury when Harley Turner is tried, and hold out for a conviction."

"Who told you that?" Vest countered.

"Lee Stroud. I'd like to have you make an affidavit to that effect."

Fear showed in Vest's face. "I won't do it," he said flatly. "I'm not getting into a feud with Cletus Curry. Stroud had no business talking. Besides, I didn't tell him that."

Ed could have threatened the man, but he didn't like threats. Instead, he tried persuasion. He argued that Harley might not be guilty, and tried to make Vest see how monstrous it would be to convict an innocent man. Vest was unhappy but held out stubbornly that Stroud had been mistaken about what he had said.

Argument having failed, Ed said, "Well, I've wasted a lot of your time, Ben, so the best I can do is help you load up these poles."

He was at home in the timber and worked hard. Vest got his load on much quicker than he would have if Ed hadn't showed up. Ed made no more mention of Harley Turner, but he was playing for Vest's good will, while at the same time working on his conscience. All he could do now was wait and hope that the man had a change of heart.

It was long after noon before he got back to town, too late to think of going out to the range. He changed his clothes and went to his office. Unexpectedly, he encountered Cletus Curry and Bill Hurd. He saw Hurd's start of surprise, but the two men walked past without any sign that they had seen him. For some reason the meeting gave him an uneasy feeling.

ONLY a few minutes later, glancing out of his window, he saw Hurd riding out of town. He quickly forgot about the C Bar C foreman when he saw Virginia riding in. He ran down the stairs and called to her, and she turned and rode back.

She said, "Oh, I thought you were out on the range."

"I couldn't go today," he replied. "Come up to the office."

A strange embarrassment came over them when they were alone together. They were in love, but they dared not touch, and they avoided each other's eyes. The situation eased a little when Ed told Virginia about Ben Vest.

"They just aren't going to give Harley any chance at all, are they?" she said despondently.

"Not if they can help it. But I'm more hopeful all the time," Ed said reassuringly.

"I came in to see Harley," she said. "Will you go with me?"

"Not today, but you can tell him about Vest if you like."

Virginia arose but didn't move at once to the door. Then she said, "Last night Rube asked me to marry him. I told him I would."

Although he had been steeling himself for this for days, Ed felt suddenly weak and sick. Then he forced a smile. "Rube is a lucky man," he said. "And I know you'll be happy, too."

Virginia turned away for a minute, dabbing at her eyes. Then, without looking in his direction, she went out.

Ed stared out of the window for a while, then got up abruptly and went back to his boardinghouse to change his clothes. He knew that it would only make matters worse if he and Virginia obviously avoided each other. He had to start treating her as his prospective sister-in-law and nothing more, and it was better to start now. When Virginia came from the jail to get her horse, Ed was waiting with Pedro tied to the same hitch-rack.

He said, "I've decided to ride home with you. We've got things to talk about, and I want to see Mom. I can't take it out on her just because Dad and I don't agree."

"I'm glad," she said. "I really think your father is sorry, but he's too proud to admit that he could be wrong. It will make Rube feel better, too."

They rode slowly and talked frankly about what their future relations must be. Rube was too good a man for them to hurt, and they agreed that they must never let their feelings toward each other be known.

"I'll wager," Ed said, "that after you've been married to Rube for a year you'll be so much in love with him you'll wonder that you ever saw anything in me."

"That isn't true," Virginia denied, "but I'll try to act like it is."

Darkness had fallen before they reached the ranch. Ed saw the relief and pleasure in his mother's eyes as she kissed him. His father growled, "Hello there," and said nothing more, but for him even that much was a concession.

"Where's Rube?" Ed asked.

"He isn't home yet," Mrs. Dawson said. "He's very seldom this late."

Ed felt fear gnawing into him. He remembered the hurried way Bill Hurd had left town. It might have been because the man knew that Rube would be alone on the range. He said, "I'm going to ride out and meet him."

"I'm going with you," Virginia said firmly.

They had gone into the house before putting their horses away, so they had only to swing into their saddles. If Rube were within three miles of the ranch he would be on a well-traveled trail, but if they didn't meet him on that trail he might be anywhere. It was in Ed's mind to ride to the Poison Creek ford if they failed to meet Rube on the trail, but he feared desperately that if they had to ride that far, they wouldn't find his brother alive—if they found him at all.

They rode slowly and in silence, because they feared to reach the end of the trail without meeting Rube. Ed kept telling himself that Rube would appear around every bend, but he never did.

Ed said, "There are half a dozen trails leading off from around this next bend. He might be on any one of them, and he may be where there's no trail at all."

"You don't think anything could have happened to him?" There was a quaver of fear in Virginia's voice.

"Old Rube can take care of himself," Ed said confidently, but the confidence was all in his voice, not in his heart.

They reached the last bend and a startled, despairing oath leaped to Ed's lips. Just ahead of them, a little way off the trail, stood Rube's horse, with dragging reins.

They spurred on to the horse, and Ed leaped from the saddle. Near the horse, crushing a bush on which he had fallen, lay Rube.

"They got him!" Ed cried out in agony.

"Damn their rotten souls to hell, they got Rube!"

VIRGINIA was on the ground by the time Ed got his brother disentangled from the bush. "Oh, God, don't let him be dead," she pleaded.

Ed was feeling for his brother's heart beat. At first he thought there was none, then he felt a feeble beat. "He's alive," he exclaimed. "He's still alive."

"Oh, thank God for that," Virginia said. "But what will we do?"

"We've got to get the doctor. I could go to the ranch and get the wagon to haul him home, but I don't think he should be moved. Virginia, have you get the nerve to stay here alone with him?"

"Of course," she said steadily. "You go for help."

"I can save time by cutting toward town from here. When we get back to the ranch I'll send the doctor on ahead. Then I'll bring the wagon. It'll be better if he doesn't recover consciousness," Ed said.

"Anything, just so he doesn't die," Virginia said.

"You're sure you'll be all right?"

"I'll be all right. Please hurry."

"I will. And you see, darling, it's not me you're in love with, it's him."

"Of course I love him, like I would love my own father—enough that I'll never let him know it isn't quite the way he wants it," she said.

They looked at each other and spontaneously moved together. For just a second their lips clung, then Ed ran back to his horse and vaulted into the saddle.

He had never given Pedro such a run as he gave him that night. His heart was filled with bitterness toward the men who had tried to murder the best person he had ever known. He had seen the gaping wound in Rube's chest, and he didn't really expect to find Rube alive when he got back. He vowed that if Rube died, at least one of the men responsible would pay. He wasn't even going to wait for the slow and uncertain methods of the law to which he had dedicated himself. This was one matter that would be settled man to man.

He was fortunate in finding Dr. Hunter at home. The doctor was a young man who wasted no time. He was ready to go by the time Ed had saddled a horse for him. Pedro was all in when they got to the ranch, but the courageous horse hadn't faltered.

Ed pointed out the trail to the doctor, and Hunter hurried on. Ed drove a team in from the pasture and was harnessing them when his father rolled out in his wheel chair.

"What's the matter? Where are you going with that team?" Dawson asked. "Has anything happened to Rube?"

"He's been shot, but he isn't dead. I've already got the doctor, and I'm going up after him."

"I knew it," Dawson said. "I knew this would happen when Rube got mixed up with that Turner girl."

"It wasn't Virginia's fault," Ed said sharply. "And Rube isn't dead. You tell Mom that Rube will be all right, and try not to scare her to death. If I weren't in such a hurry I'd tell her myself."

Dawson wheeled himself back to the house. Ed knew that his parents' grief would be as great as his own, for no son could have been better to his parents than Rube had been. Even Win Dawson would realize that.

Ed filled the bottom of the wagon box with hay and ran into the house to get quilts to put over it. "Are you sure you've got everything you need?" his mother asked quietly.

"Everything. The doctor and Virginia are with him. Don't worry, Mom, he's going to be all right," Ed told her.

"I'll have a bed all fixed for him," she said. He knew that he didn't need to question her courage.

"Who did it?" Dawson asked.

"Some of the Curry outfit. They shot him from ambush," Ed said, and hurried back to the wagon.

There was no road that could be called such, and frequently he had to abandon even the trail. It would be a rough ride back for Rube, but it was the best they could do. His heart pounded with suspense

when he stopped the team a few yards from where Rube lay. The doctor was on his knees, still working over Rube, and Virginia hurried over to the wagon.

"He's not dead," she reported. "He's been conscious for a long time, but I wouldn't let him talk."

"I got back as quick as I could, but it must have been a long time for you."

"I didn't mind for myself."

"What does the doctor say?"

"That if he pulled through this far he ought to make it."

"Then he will. Rube will never give up."

They loaded Rube carefully into the wagon and tied the horse behind. While Ed drove, Virginia held Rube's head in her lap, and the doctor watched his patient, ready to administer a stimulant when needed.

Though Ed drove slowly, it was impossible to avoid all the rocks and bumps, and every jolt was agony to him, even more than it was to the wounded man. It was broad day when they drove into the yard where Mr. and Mrs. Dawson waited. They had been up all night.

NONE of them got far from the house that day. The slug had gone clear through Rube's body, and the doctor didn't have to probe for it. Hunter had gone back to town, but he returned late that evening.

After he had concluded his examination he said, "That man has a constitution like a horse. An ordinary man would have been dead before this, but now I give him a fifty-fifty chance to live."

The doctor had brought along a nurse to take charge of the patient, and he ordered the Dawson family to get some sleep. The nurse, Mrs. Dawson, and Virginia, could give Rube all the care he required, and Ed realized that his services were not needed.

Rube was able to talk a little now, but he hadn't seen his assassin. Sheriff Lewis had come out and pretended to make an investigation, but he hadn't been able to find any clues—in contrast to the detective work he had done when Earl Curry was shot.

Against Virginia's protests, Ed saddled a fresh horse and rode out on the range the next day. Everywhere he looked he saw C Bar C cattle, indicating that the Curry men had been busy even while Rube Dawson lingered between life and death.

Ed kept a close watch for C Bar C men, though he was careful where he rode. Not until late afternoon did he see any of them. There were three in the party, and he guessed that it would be Bill Hurd and the two Texas gunmen, Latigo Gordon and Jock Smalley. One of the Texans, he was certain, had fired the shot.

As he figured it, Bill Hurd had told the men that Rube would be riding home alone, and Hurd knew where Rube would strike the main trail. He had ordered the men to be waiting at that point. In the dusk it had been easy for them to hide until he had passed, and then shoot him in the back.

When the men were out of sight Ed rode down to the Poison Creek ford, where they were likely to cross on their way back to the Curry ranch. He wasn't sure that he was going to challenge them. It would be suicide for him to tackle all three of them single-handed, unless he was prepared to shoot from ambush as they had done, and he couldn't bring himself to that. But there was a chance that he would hear something from their talk that would answer the question gnawing at his brain.

He hid his horse some distance below the ford and walked back through the brush. It was thick enough to afford him all the protection he needed, and he was sure they wouldn't be looking for him.

From long experience he knew that their horses would want to stop and drink when they crossed the creek. No range horse ever crossed a stream without making a pretense of being thirsty in order to gain a few minutes rest. If the men stopped they would talk, and from where he waited, at a distance no greater than twenty feet, he could hear.

He had a wait of more than an hour before he heard them coming. He moved slowly around the bush through which he could see but not be seen. They were almost at the ford before he caught a glimpse of them. He had chosen for his hiding

place the side on which they would come out.

As he had anticipated, their horses wanted to drink as soon as they were in the stream with the water lapping around their legs. The men let the reins slip through their fingers, but to Ed's surprise there were only two men instead of the three he had expected. Those two were Gordon and Hurd. Jock Smalley was missing.

He heard Hurd say, "Give me a smoke. I'm out."

Latigo Gordon built himself a smoke and handed the makings over to Hurd. The horses had raised their slobbering heads, but stood still while Bill Hurd rolled a cigarette.

Ed heard Gordon say, "Did you tell Jock to get some Bull Durham in town?"

"No, I forgot it," Hurd said, "but I have some at the ranch."

"Anyway, he'll bring word whether Dawson is still alive," Gordon said. "If it had been me you told, there wouldn't have been any doubt about it. I'd have made sure he was dead before I left him."

"Wish I could've found you," Hurd said, as their mounts started to splash toward the other bank. "After Jock bungled the job the first time I was afraid of him, but he swore that he wouldn't miss again.

"He's good with a gun when he's crowded, but he's too spooky for a job like that," Gordon said.

They were talking about Rube's attempted murder as coolly as if it were no more than killing a beef, and the lurking Ed felt a tremendous anger taking full possession of him. He knew now that Jock Smalley had fired the shot, but Smalley was no more guilty than these two.

THEY had reached the bank now, and their horses were scrambling out of the water. They were broadside to Ed when he stepped out of the brush.

"Just a minute, Hurd," he said clearly.

Had there been three of them he wouldn't have taken the chance, but he had nothing but contempt for Bill Hurd, and he felt able to take care of Latigo Gordon, the man nearest him.

For a minute they seemed undecided what to do. They knew who it was and they figured that they would get shot in the back if they didn't stop. Hurd stopped his horse a little before Gordon did and so was a few feet behind his gunman. Then Gordon spun his mount toward Ed and went for his gun.

It was the move Ed was looking for. His gun was already in his hand and he fired just as Gordon's sixgun cleared the holster. He didn't miss. He heard the plunk of the bullet, saw Gordon stiffen a moment before he slumped over the saddle horn. Gordon pulled the trigger but his shot went wide.

Hurd, too, had gone for his gun, and there was a look of desperation on his face. He fired at the same moment Ed fired at him, but his horse, startled by the other shots, leaped ahead just as Hurd pulled the trigger, and he missed. Ed, standing flat-footed, followed the movement of the man and again his bullet found its mark, though a little lower than he intended.

Hurd's gun fell from his hand. The C Bar C foreman clutched wildly for the saddle horn, missed and tumbled over his horse's shoulder to the ground.

Latigo Gordon was still in the saddle, his gun in his hand. The man didn't lack courage. He checked his horse, wheeled it around, and raised his gun for another shot, but he was slow now. Again Ed got in the first shot and again he didn't miss. This time his bullet went straight into the gunman's heart. Gordon's shot went harmlessly into the ground. Then the gunman's head struck the earth; he rolled over and lay still.

Ed turned back to Bill Hurd. Hurd was on his back, his face contorted with terrible pain from the bullet in his stomach. He gave a blood-curdling scream as Ed stood over him.

There was no pity in Ed's heart as he looked down at his enemy. He stood quietly until Hurd's agonized screams began to subside.

"Help me, Dawson, please help me," Hurd begged.

"I wouldn't touch you with a pole," Ed

said. "I heard you say that you told Smalley to kill my brother."

"You can't let me suffer like this. Get a doctor," the man pleaded.

"Why should I? You didn't get a doctor for Rube," Ed said bleakly.

"You've got to help me. I can't stand the pain. If you won't get a doctor, shoot me in the head."

"If you were a horse I would, but you don't deserve the mercy I'd show a horse," Ed said implacably.

Hurd doubled up in his agony for a minute, then fell back. "Dawson," he said then, "if you'll fetch me a doctor, I'll tell you who killed Earl Curry."

Although convinced that the man would be dead long before he could return with Dr. Hunter, Ed said, "It's a deal. But if you lie I'll know it. Who was it?"

The answer came as a complete surprise to Ed, and for a moment he could scarcely believe his ears.

"I did," Bill Hurd moaned.

"You?" Ed cried incredulously.

"I wouldn't accuse myself of murder if I weren't guilty," Hurd said. "I killed him."

"But why?"

"Because he was ruining the old man. I've worked for Cletus all my life. I knew that if Earl weren't stopped the old man would lose everything and so would I. I saw the fight between Earl and young Turner, and when Earl went to town, it came to me how I could kill him and put the blame on the Turner kid," Hurd confessed.

Ed had no more doubt that he was hearing the truth. "You stole Harley's horse and rode it out there?" he asked.

"Yes. And I was the one who told the sheriff to take pictures of the tracks. Now go for the doctor."

"Just a minute," Ed said grimly. "I've got to know more. What become of the thirty thousand dollars?"

"Earl stole it."

"Then Cletus murdered his wife?"

"He did it to protect Earl. He couldn't have paid Earl's debts if he'd had to dig up that money. He couldn't deny Earl anything."

That, then, was the whole sordid story. But Ed knew it wouldn't do him much good unless he could verify it in some way. He was sure that Bill Hurd would be dead before he could get back with a witness. If he did live he would deny everything.

Ed said, "I'll get a doctor for you, Hurd, but not until you put what you've said in writing."

"I can't write. I'm in too much pain," Hurd moaned.

Ed was beginning to feel sorry for the man. It wasn't easy to watch anyone in such agony, but Harley Turner's life was at stake. He had to repress his human instincts. He was never without a pencil and a notebook, and he thrust the pencil into the man's hand.

"I'll hold the notebook," he said. "Just write what I tell you. I'll make it short."

WHILE he gritted his teeth and writhed in agony, Bill Hurd wrote, "I killed Earl Curry because Earl went through his father's money and Curry killed his wife because he couldn't pay back the money he got from her. Jock Smalley shot—"

The pencil dropped from Hurd's hand. "I can't—write any more," he gasped out, and Ed knew it was true. The last letters were almost impossible to read, but the rest were plain enough for the meaning to be unmistakable.

Ed let the man rest a minute, then he said, "Try just once more, Hurd. Sign your name." He got the pencil back in the man's hand, and with a final effort Hurd managed to scrawl his signature.

Somehow, Hurd seemed to feel better. He said, "At least I can die clean."

"I'll get help just as fast as it's possible," Ed promised. "Is there anything else you want to say?"

"No—just get a doctor," Hurd groaned.

An hour later, after running his horse all the way, Ed was in Copperton. He stopped at Dr. Hunter's office and tersely told the doctor what had happened. "If he was shot through the stomach he'll probably be dead. But I'll go anyway," the doctor said. "Shouldn't you tell the sheriff?"

"I'll tell him," Ed said.

He found Sheriff Lewis in his office and said curtly, "There's been another shooting on the range, Sheriff. You'll find a couple of dead men, or at least one, at the Poison Creek ford."

"Who are they? Who killed 'em?" the sheriff demanded.

"One is Bill Hurd and the other is on of Cletus Curry's gunmen, name of Latigo Gordon."

The eyes of Lewis almost popped from his head. "Who killed 'em?" he repeated.

"I couldn't say. Hurd wasn't dead when I left, and I've sent the doctor out there."

"Did you kill them?" Lewis thundered.

"You're a great detective, I hear. Why don't you find out?" Ed rasped.

He turned and walked out, leaving Lewis wondering if he had the authority to arrest the lawyer. Apparently Lewis decided that he hadn't, for Ed wasn't followed.

Ed headed for the Buffalo Bar, intending to show Lee Stroud Hurd's confession and ask the bartender to put it in the safe for temporary safekeeping. But when he entered he saw Jock Smalley drinking at the bar, and cold, implacable hatred spread over him. This furtive, ratlike little gunman was the one who had shot Rube, and even now Rube's life hovered in the balance.

Smalley turned to look at him, and something in Ed's face rang an alarm. Smalley's hand dropped to his gun and his mouth twisted in a snarl.

Ed stopped six feet away, with his hands at his sides. He said in a voice that surprised him by its naturalness. "Just the man I want to see, Smalley. I just found out that you were the one who shot my brother."

"It's a lie," Smalley spat out. "What're you trying to do—pick a fight with me?"

"Not unless you go for your gun. But I've got Bill Hurd's confession in my pocket that he ordered you to do it."

Every man in the saloon paused to listen. Lee Stroud, on the other side of the bar, stepped up behind Smalley.

"You lie," Smalley snarled. "Bill Hurd wouldn't say a thing like that."

"A man will tell the truth usually when he knows he is going to die, and Bill Hurd is dying," Ed said evenly. "Latigo Gordon is already dead."

A look of wild unbelief came over the little gunfighter's face. With the desperation of a cornered rat, he went for his gun. Ed, too, reached for his gun, but neither of them fired a shot. Lee Stroud's arm rose and fell, and the blackjack in his hand descended on Jock Smalley's head. The gunman toppled forward on his face just as Ed's gun cleared the leather.

"I don't like shooting in my place," Stroud remarked casually. "You say Bill Hurd confessed?"

"Thanks, Lee," Ed said sincerely. "Hurd confessed, all right; not only that he sent Smalley to kill Rube, but a lot of other things. One of them was that Hurd himself murdered Earl Curry."

"That's hard to believe," Stroud said.

"Here it is, read it." Ed passed over the notebook which bore several smears of Hurd's blood, and Stroud spelled out the words.

"That's Hurd's signature all right, even if it is shaky," the bartender said. "I've cashed plenty of his checks and I'd know it anywhere."

SEVERAL of the men who had heard the confession read hurried out of the the saloon, and the news would soon be all over town. Stroud and another man carried Smalley into a back room and revived him. Smalley started to curse until Stroud threatened him again with the blackjack.

"You shut up and listen to what Hurd wrote," Stroud ordered. The gunman cowered as he listened to the damning words.

"I didn't shoot Dawson," he whined. "That was Latigo."

"Latigo didn't," Ed said coldly. "Hurd said that he couldn't find Latigo, so he sent you."

"What—what happened to Bill and Latigo?" Smalley quavered.

"I shot them," Ed said bluntly. "And if Rube dies I'll see that you hang."

"How much did Curry pay you, you rat?" Stroud demanded.

Smalley looked around despairingly and decided that only the truth could do him any good. "He promised to pay five hundred dollars if Dawson died. I didn't get a cent," he whimpered.

"Before we go any further I wish you'd send somebody for Sherm Parkin," Ed said. Within half an hour the messenger returned with the county attorney.

"What is all the balderdash this man's been trying to tell me?" Parkin blustered.

"Cold facts, Parkin," Ed said grimly. "I've got Bill Hurd's dying confession that he murdered Earl Curry and that he knew Curry had murdered his wife. Smalley, here, has just confessed that he shot my brother on Hurd's orders and Curry's offer of five hundred dollars."

Parkin wilted visibly. "It's hard to believe," he said.

"You'd better get on the right side, Parkin, if you want to keep on practising law," Ed told the man. "Conditions have changed. Cletus Curry is going to hang for murdering his wife. He's lost all his power, because Earl broke him. Earl lost thousands to Dutch Kopp, which he never paid. He was being blackmailed by a man here in Copperton, and I can prove it. And don't look to Ern Willmore to help you out, because we've got the goods on him for trying to bribe a juror. Stick to Cletus Curry and you're done. I can probably link you up with the jury bribing anyway."

"I knew nothing about it," Parkin denied. "If those men broke the law, I'll prosecute them." He didn't look very threatening; he was indeed a badly scared man

Only then did Ed show him Hurd's confession. Perspiration poured from the lawyer's face, and he dabbed at it constantly with a handkerchief. "I've been deceived," he mumbled. "I'll do everything possible to bring those men to justice."

"You'd better," Ed warned grimly. "And I want Harley Turner released before noon tomorrow."

Nothing more could be done until the sheriff returned and Cletus Curry was placed under arrest. Ed left Hurd's confession in Stroud's safe and rode slowly back to the ranch.

There was much to think about. Events had transpired with the suddeness and violence of a thunder storm, but the rule of Cletus Curry was at an end forever. The old tyrant was at the end of his rope. How literally he was at the end of his rope Ed didn't learn until the next day. Someone had carried the news to him of what had happened in the Buffalo Bar, and when the sheriff went out to arrest Curry the next morning, he found Cletus hanging by the neck in his own barn, dead for hours.

No longer would Cletus be a menace to the Dawson ranch. Harley Turner would be cleared and, if Curry had any assets left, Harley and Virginia would get back at least part of their money.

The great worry on Ed's mind was whether Rube would pull through. He was almost afraid to enter the house for fear he would hear bad news.

They hadn't heard a thing at the ranch. "Ed," his mother exclaimed, "We've been worried. Did you have trouble?"

Trouble? He hadn't thought of it as that, but there had surely been plenty of it that day. "Sorry I kept you up," he said. "How is Rube?"

"He's getting along fine."

Virginia hadn't said anything, but the way she looked at Ed let him know that she was relieved that he was back.

Ed found it hard to tell them what had happened, but they were entitled to know. He said, "I've got news for you, but I wish you'd all come into Rube's room. I want him to hear it, too."

MRS. DAWSON and Virginia went into the room wonderingly, but Dawson didn't move. "You, too, Dad," Ed said, and Dawson rolled his chair up to the door.

Rube was able to grin up at Ed. "About time you were showing up," he said. "These women were just going to start out looking for you, but I told 'em you were too smart to get bushwhacked like I did." Virginia was standing beside him, and he took her hand. Sometimes Ed wished that Rube would stop harping on how smart his brother was.

Ed said, "I did about the dumbest thing today that a man ever did, but it's better to be lucky than smart, and I was lucky. I think our troubles are over."

They couldn't think that he meant what he said. After a moment Rube said, half humorously, "What troubles?"

"In the first place, Bill Hurd confessed that he killed Earl Curry. So, Virginia, Harley will soon be free. He admitted that Cletus Curry murdered your mother and that Earl stole your money. And when Cletus Curry goes to jail it'll come out that Earl had him practically broke, so C Bar C won't be stealing our range any more," Ed answered.

Virginia's face was suddenly radiant. She looked at Ed as though he had been transformed into some sort of superman, but she was too overcome to speak.

Then Rube said, "Didn't I tell you Ed would fix everything up? But how did you get Bill Hurd to talk? He was the last man I'd have suspected."

"He was dying," Ed said, and then he told them all that happened. During the telling Rube became so excited that Virginia had to warn him to lie quietly.

"You dumb ox, I thought you'd use your brains to settle it, not a sixgun," Rube said, but his voice throbbed with pride.

Then Win Dawson spoke from the doorway. "Didn't I always tell you he wouldn't be any good as a lawyer," he said.

They all turned upon him disgustedly, and Mrs. Dawson said, "Win Dawson, of all the bullheaded, stupid—" Then she stopped. There were tears in Dawson's eyes, but a smile on his face, and they saw that he was just as proud of Ed as they were. Mrs. Dawson stepped quickly over and gave him a kiss.

Next morning, Ed and Virginia rode back to Copperton, where they heard the news of Cletus Curry's suicide. They learned, too, that Bill Hurd was dead when the doctor reached him.

"Somehow, in spite of everything, I feel sorry for Cletus," Virginia said. "I guess he was the loneliest man I ever knew."

Ed's legal training was beginning to assert himself. He said, "As your lawyer I'm going to file your claim on Curry's estate. If there's anything left, you'll get it, for there are no other heirs."

"I never thought of that," Virginia said, "but all I want is to get Harley cleared and stop the range war Curry started."

"We won't have to worry about that," Ed assured her.

Ed ran across Ben Vest in the Buffalo Bar, and the rancher heartily agreed to testify against Ern Willmore. Sherm Parkin had arranged for a hearing for Harley Turner at two o'clock, the earliest he could get Judge Bray to convene court. Wilmore, the prosecutor, did not appear.

When Ed presented Bill Hurd's confession as evidence and offered to call Jock Smalley as a corroborating witness, Parkin said, "Your Honor, I see no need of calling any witness. The State asks for a dismissal of the charge against Harley Turner, in view of his obvious innocence."

Bray, still bewildered by the amazing events of the previous day, mumbled, "Case dismissed. The defendant is free to go."

Virginia and Harley were locked in each other's arms, and Ed found himself surrounded by a veritable mob extending congratulations. He realized that so long as he chose to remain in Copperton he would never lack for clients.

Virginia was taking Harley back to the ranch. But when she asked Ed if he were going back with them, he told her he had too much business to attend to.

He said, "I know Rube is out of danger now, so you tell him I'll be out later to offer my congratulations."

"Yes," she said, "I'll tell him." But there was no enthusiasm in her voice.

It was three days before Ed was settled enough in his own mind to ride back to the ranch. He supposed that Rube and Virginia would be married as soon as Rube was able to get around, and he had steeled himself to face the stern reality of trying to be a brother to the woman he loved.

AFTER the rest of them had had supper in the dining room, Virginia took a tray to Rube. She was gone a long time, and Ed talked to his father and

Harley. Dawson had taken a great liking to Harley, and he was full of plans about how the C Bar C and the Circle D were to be run.

Finally Virginia came out, and there was a strange look on her face. She said, "Ed, Rube wants to talk to you."

When Ed entered the room, Rube said smilingly, "Shut the door. I want this to be a private talk."

Ed wondered what his brother had in mind, but he didn't expect what was to come. Rube said, "I've just been lying here, and I came to the conclusion that marriage isn't for me. I think a lot of Virginia, but I've been a lone wolf too long to enjoy being tied down. I hated to break the news that I couldn't marry her, and then dog-goned if she didn't tell me that you were the one she was in love with, after all. Boy, you're a lucky dog, and if you don't marry that girl I'll disown you."

Ed knew his brother too well to be fooled. Rube was lying, but it would do no good to accuse him. Somehow he had guessed their secret. One of them had betrayed his feelings—he didn't know how—and he knew that Rube would never go through with the marriage no matter what they told him. It would be unfair to Rube not to pretend that he had been fooled.

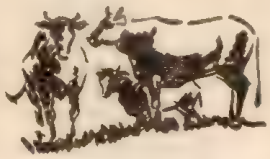
Ed said, "I'm glad you feel that way, Rube. I won't deny that I've been in love with Virginia ever since I met her."

"Then get out of here," Rube grinned. "It's a mighty nice night to take a walk."

Ed pressed his brother's hand, then went out to find Virginia.

Rube Dawson lay back on the pillows with a sigh. He had, he thought, put it over. They would never know that he had recovered consciousness soon after they had moved him out of that bush where he had fallen, and had heard them promise to keep him from ever learning about their love for each other.

KNOW YOUR WEST



1. What color are the Santa Gertrudis breed of beef cattle originated on the famous big King Ranch in Texas?

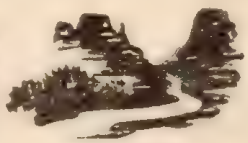
2. What is it that Spanish speaking sheepherders call a *pinco*, but that English speaking sheep people more often call a bum or bummer?

3. Only two old frontier forts west of the Mississippi are preserved as National Monuments, one in Wyoming, one in New Mexico. Can you name either one?

4. What cow country state ranks first in the production of potash in the whole U. S.? (And it ain't Texas, either!).

5. A Utah RANCH ROMANCES writer named Robertson won the Western Writers of America 1953 award for the best juvenile western novel ("Sagebrush Sorrel"). Remember his first name?

6. J. R. and Ab Blocker, Ike Pryor, Geo. W. Saunders, and Oliver Loving were noted in the old west as which of the following: (1) trail bosses, (2) sheriffs, (3) scouts, (4) frontier judges?



7. According to the old legend, anyone who drinks from the Hassayampa River in Arizona can never again do what?

8. What is the more common name for the dried meat that Mexicans call *charqui?* (CHAR-kee).

9. Sacaton, tabosa, curly mesquite, buffalo, gramma, blue-stem and red-top are all varieties of what?

10. Of course you know a male sheep is a ram, but in some parts of the west he is also called what else?

—Rattlesnake Robert.

You will find the answers to these questions on page 96. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Wayside Interlude

By Will Cook

A MAN can change a lot in five years—or one night . . .

WHEN I came to Goddard's station in '81, Sheree was still alive, and a man could forget the damned heat and the desert and the Apaches. But now it was '87 and between those years things had changed, little things that a man don't notice, but all adding up to spell his ruin.

I finished breakfast first—Frank seemed to take forever and a day to do anything—and went out in the yard. The desert has a special flavor in the morning when the sun is flat on the horizon and the silence of the night is still hanging over the land. But this morning was different. I knew it when I saw the column of smoke that bloomed on the stony mountain summits to the northeast.

Behind this cluster of low adobe buildings that made up Frank Goddard's stage stop, the desert ran on, split briefly by a road that wound gently down-tilting to Fort Apache, twenty-six miles deeper into that part of Arizona that is Geronimo's private Apacheria.

In the other direction, the road led to Lordsburg. The station was centered in the curved outline of this valley, buttressed on both sides by barren towers of rock.

Inside the station, Frank Goddard shuffled through the rooms. Finally he came to the door and leaned against the frame as though he was tired and never could get enough sleep.

I pointed to the spiral of smoke, and said, "What do you make of it?"

He squinted his eyes against the early morning glare. "War party," he said.

"Smoke yesterday, too," I said and my voice was worried. I shot a glance at Goddard, but he seemed unimpressed. "Mirror flashes the day before," I added. "This will be the first stage through in over a month."

"If it gets through," Goddard said in a voice that was positive it wouldn't.

I suppose when I get to be twenty-five I can look back and attribute my temper to my youth. "Dammit," I flared, then looked at him and closed my mouth.

"Too hot to get worked up," he said softly and squinted across the lonely distance. He was a tall man of rangy build with a latent character in a face badly in need of a shave. His shirt tail hung laxly over the waistband of his faded jeans, more from negligence than from an honest effort to defeat the heat.

LIKE everything else that came with this lonely station, Goddard had learned somehow to tolerate it without complaint. Sometimes I got the idea that he didn't care enough to complain.

He stood there under the brassy sun, his hat brim boxing his face in deep shadows. From the vicinity of the barn, fractions of conversation floated by. The Mexican hostlers were talking about the smoke, I knew.

Goddard mopped a sleeve across his face and studied the Lordsburg road. He swung his head and stared out at the tapering flats leading to Fort Apache.

I knew what he was looking for, the plume of dust that would mark the passage of the westbound stage, now a day overdue. "There's nothing out there," I said.

"Apaches," Goddard amended.

"You think they got the stage?"

"You'd have to ask 'em the next time they stop and water their horses," he said and consulted his pocket watch, the only ornamental thing about him. He replaced the timepiece carefully and turned back inside.

I followed him a moment later. Within the station, the adobe walls seemed to capture and imprison the sun's growing strength; already a bake-oven heat made breathing a chore.

Scraping a chair away from the table, I sat against the wall, not saying anything, for after three years a man can run out of things to talk about.

Goddard went to the bar and got out a bottle. He gave the room a glance before draining his glass with practiced speed. I'd seen him do this before and wondered what he saw with that quick sweep of his eyes. Without thinking, I looked around.

The room was a mess. Dust clung to the walls and lamps; it layered the shelves and table. The only thing showing any care was the framed daguerreotype against the far wall.

Goddard polished that every day. He had a right to. Sheree was *his* wife.

Sometimes I'd look at Goddard and then the picture, amazed how a man could age in six years. In the picture, Goddard's face was seriously intent, the long lips resolute. A fresh haircut, parted down the middle, was combed neatly and partially concealed his brow. The round-cornered celluloid collar fitted loosely; a heavy black tie flowed across the expanse of a white shirt front.

Sheree gazed out with a wide-eyed innocence. I met her a month after they were married, and somehow she never lost that expression. Her face always held a breathless expectancy as though she were pausing for a moment in time, listening for a familiar voice.

Goddard laughed a lot then, and it seemed as if the days were never long enough for him to get all the work done that he had planned. The day I came riding into the yard with a foaming horse and a gun that still smelled of freshly burned powder, Goddard seemed to skip

over these things. He showed me where I could sleep and after that, I lost the inclination to move on.

A year later, things had changed. They always do when someone dies, especially a woman like Sheree. He left things just as they were after that. The curtains hanging over the windows became mildewed and half-rotted, as was the hand that had fashioned them. I wanted to take them down and mentioned it once, but he snapped at me, and after that I never mentioned it.

I crossed to the grimy window and rubbed a spot clear with the heel of my hand. The smoke was gone now, but I watched anyway, because when you can't see Apaches, you start to worry.

"No sign of that cavalry patrol that was through here day before yesterday," I said.

"They're chasing shadows," Goddard murmured, and the bottle clinked again on the rim of his glass.

"Maybe they're holding the stage over for an escort," I said.

"Stage or cavalry," Goddard said flatly and leaned on the rough bar. "That's what that smoke means. There's a fifty-fifty chance either way."

"One of these days they'll get tired of asking permission to water their horses here," I said. "Then it'll be our turn."

"I hear hell is no hotter than Arizona," Goddard said and went into the kitchen.

Idleness can be like a disease, so I went to the barn to check the spare harness, although I was positive it was in good repair. I killed another three hours in the corral going over the stock, and it was near noon when I went back to the adobe station.

Goddard was by the front door, leaning against the frame. His eyes flicked over the land, and without changing expression, he pointed to the flat cloud of tawny dust that marked the oncoming stage.

WE WAITED, and it seemed a long time before it rocked over a small rise northeast of the station and boiled under the pole archway. Goddard still leaned against the wall as the stage slid to a halt amid protesting brakeblocks and a violent teetering of its springs.

The driver handled the ribbons; the seat beside him was empty. The hostlers hurried up and led the sweating team away. The driver dismounted wearily and leaned against the coach, not looking at us.

I stood there, and Goddard opened the door. A man fell to the ground, his body raising a small puff of dust. Dried blood caked his white shirt and two cigars sifted from his pocket to lie between his awkwardly crossed legs.

Another man lay on the floor with his face gone, his revolver still clutched tightly in his hand. Goddard glanced then at the woman who sat frozen in the far corner, her eyes wide and glazed. He took her hand, pulling her toward the door, then handled her more gently when he saw her condition.

The driver raised his head and looked at me. "They jumped us early this morning, Dan. A small tribe of Coyotes. I tried to outrun 'em." He pointed toward the box. "Harry went off with a busted shoulder. They stopped then. I could hear him yell over the team."

Goddard's voice pulled my attention around. "Help me get her into the station, Dan."

I took her arm and we half-carried her inside. She was a small woman, near thirty, and her face would have been pretty without the wild strain of fear.

Once inside, she started to fight as though she had to go back to the dead man. "My husband!" she screamed. "My God!"

"You're all right now," Goddard said soothingly and shot me an outraged look. "Why do women travel when they're like this?" The woman began to tremble, her teeth chattering loudly in the silence. "Get her into a bedroom," Goddard said to me. For a second I thought she was going to battle me again, but she didn't. I led her into one of the spare rooms, and she lay down, her eyes a complete blank.

When I came back into the main room, Jim Ruff, the driver had come in and was already halfway through a bottle. I went behind the bar and took it away from him. "Let's stay sober," I said. Ruff speared me with a glance and his eyes dropped to

the .44 I always wear. He just leaned on the bar as though he needed support and didn't argue.

"You see the cavalry out there?" I asked.

"No," Ruff said. "We held over a day for an escort, but they didn't show up. Probably got pinned down in the hills and are roasting head down over a slow fire by now." He pawed his face and slapped the bar. "Hell, it was awful. All the time she was screaming her damn head off. I can still hear her."

"Which one was her husband?" Goddard asked.

"The one without the face," Ruff stated.

I shoved the bottle toward him. "I was wrong about the drink," I told him and walked away to stand by the window. I studied the land, but there was nothing there. The smoke could mean anything; a white man had never learned to read it.

"This damn heat," Ruff said. I looked around at him and he added, "You'd better get those two buried. They'll spoil in a hurry."

"I suppose," I said and went outside. Two of the Mexicans carried the dead men out back of the pole corral and when I left, they were trying to peck their way through the baked earth.

It was nearly two before I fixed anything to eat. Ruff still stood at the bar, the bottle empty and his eyes turned red and intolerant.

Goddard sat at the table, his hands folded. "I've been planning to get out for a long time," he said. "Thought I'd move south—Texas, maybe, or even to California. There's a lot of good land down there just waiting to be worked."

Ruff glanced out the door, then flipped his head around, and sweat was a slick shine on his rough features. "Why don't you learn another song, Goddard? You've been talking about moving for five years."

"I like to make plans," Goddard said softly. I offered him a plate, but he waved it aside. "None for me, thanks."

RUFF'S experience had shaken him and the whisky had loosened his tongue. "You're the talkingest fool I ever seen," Ruff said and made a pawing motion on the bar with his hand. I glanced quickly from one to the other and on Goddard's face I noticed strain and a pronounced worry in his eyes.

"What about the woman?" I said. "She's going to have a baby, Frank."

"Then she'll have it," Goddard said, and I could see that it didn't matter one way or another to him.

"You got to help her," I said.

"You go help her," Goddard said, staring at me.

"I don't know nothing about babies," I said, worried and trying not to show it. "Damn it—can't you think of somebody else for a change? You're not alone in this world."

I hadn't meant to say that, but it's that way sometimes. A man will go along for years, not consciously thinking a thing, and then he gets excited and blurts it out.

"Is that why you stay?" Goddard asked in a very soft voice. "You think I'm off my nut and can't take care of myself—is that it?"

"I never said that, Frank." I was trying to cover up and making a bad job of it.

"Go see to the woman," he said, and I got up from the table.

The Mexicans had unloaded the baggage, and I saw her name on a tag, Emily Keene. I never bothered about knocking, just let myself into her room.

Mrs. Keene's once pretty face was blotchy. She lay motionless, staring at the bare ridgepoles and the spiderwebs in the corners. For a moment I wished that I had scrubbed the room.

The door opened behind me and Goddard stepped inside. He bent over her and looked intently at her face. There was a film of sweat coating her cheeks and forehead. Her lips were bloodless and drawn tightly across her even teeth.

"Is she going to have it now?" I couldn't keep the question back.

"Pretty soon," Goddard murmured. "That jolting coach sort of brought things to a boil." He bent over her and shook her lightly. "Can you eat anything? You'll need strength for what's ahead."

She roused herself as if from a deep dream. "What's ahead? He's dead, isn't he?"

Goddard looked at me, but I couldn't help him. A man just doesn't have an answer when someone talks like that. I bent over her and said, "You don't have much time, Mrs. Keene. There's the baby to think of."

"I don't want it," she said, and her voice was quietly, dead. "I never should have come out here in the first place."

"Is there anything I can get you?" Goddard asked.

"Just leave me alone," she said and turned her head away from us.

We went back into the main room where the heat was thick and pressing. Goddard went to the bar and took a long drink, then threw the empty bottle out the front door. The shattering glass seemed to rouse Jim Ruff from a dream. "What a dirty way to die," he said softly and locked eyes with Goddard. I held my breath, but whatever was in his mind faded, and he turned toward the door.

The coach still waited before the station, the lacquered panels puckered with bullet holes. Ruff studied the summits but saw no sign of life. "Where's that damn cavalry?" he asked and struck the door casing with his fist.

"What are you thinking about?" Goddard asked softly.

Ruff licked his lips. "The same as you are—a way to get out of here before the Apaches come."

"You're lying," Goddard said. "You're thinking about running out and leaving Dan and me to fight 'em alone."

"The heat's got you," Ruff said, trying to laugh it off.

I could feel the tension building up between them and tried to head it off. "We're in enough trouble without squabbling," I said. "The heat's getting both of you."

I didn't blame Ruff for wanting to leave; I would have liked to go myself, but a man's pride is a fool thing, holding him when good sense tells him to go. Goddard was afraid, but no more so than I was.

Ruff said, "Don't start anything with me, Goddard." He gripped the edge of the bar until the knuckles showed white.

"Don't let this spook you," I said quickly, and Ruff shot me an intolerant glance, plainly warning me to mind my own business.

"I don't like to have a man threaten me," Goddard said in a strained voice. "I have enough trouble without you threatening me."

Ruff pawed the sweat from his face, wiping it on the leg of his jeans. "Shut your mouth, you hear? I don't have to stand here and listen to your mouth!" He snapped his head around for a quick look outside. "This stinking hole," he said. "Nothing to do but stand around and wait to be killed."

"Go on and run," Goddard said. "You're no friend, Ruff."

DOUBLING his fist, Ruff scrubbed the knuckles across his mouth. "Now that I think of it," he said, "I always wanted to smash your face." He charged before I could stop him, closing the distance with one long bound.

Fists smashed against bone, and from the expression on Ruff's face, the shock of it was a wild relief. Goddard locked his arms around Ruff and they grappled back and forth, their boots scuffling on the hard-packed dirt floor. Goddard split Ruff's lips, then took a raking blow high on the cheek bone and fell back a step. He hit Ruff twice in the mouth as the man charged again, driving Goddard back against the table. Ruff hit Goddard again, this time under the heart, and stepped back to let Goddard fall.

Silence hung thick in the room, broken only by the sawing of Ruff's wind. I said, "You can go now, Ruff. You've fought him and finished any friendship that was between you. You don't have any more responsibility toward him. Take a horse and get out."

"Sure," Ruff said. "Shoot your mouth off. What are you hanging around for? Because of him?" He pointed to Goddard, still sitting on the floor. Ruff laughed. "Getting out in the world takes guts too,

Dan. You got to face people—you can't hide here."

He wheeled and charged through the door. A moment later there was a sharp drumming of hoofs along the Fort Apache road, and then the sound faded to nothing, swallowed up by the vastness of the desert.

Goddard read the question in my eyes. "I'm all right," he said and turned his puffed face away from me.

After that, time seemed to be suspended, but at last the sun died and a grayness settled over the land. I sat at the table, thinking about what Ruff had said. Maybe I had been fooling myself by thinking that I stayed because of Goddard. Sometimes a man is reluctant to see the truth, and I came to the conclusion that I was ducking it. I had killed a man in a fight, and that was wrong, but the deeper wrong was never admitting my mistake to other men.

When full darkness came, I got up and lighted the lamps. In the kitchen I found some left-over stew and ate it, then went to Mrs. Keene's room and opened the door. A soft moaning filled the room. I fumbled for the lamp, adjusting the wick quickly.

She lay on the bed, her body arched with pain. I took one look and ran back into the main room for Goddard.

"Now's the time," I said tightly. "This won't wait, Frank."

He swore softly and knocked over a chair in his hurry to get to her. He took one look and spoke without glancing at me. "Hot water and all the clean cloth you can find."

I ran into the kitchen as Emily Keene's strained moan came through the station, low and intense and somehow lost. I don't know how I ever got through the night. It seemed that Goddard and I had reached the peak of our helplessness. In the lamplight I watched Goddard's face and saw that for the first time in five years he had found pity for someone besides himself. It was a new experience for him, or it had been so long since he had experienced it that it seemed so.

Dawn made pale streaks in the sky when I went out into the main room, blowing out the lamps. Surprisingly, I had forgotten about the Apaches, and somehow, it didn't matter anymore. I went into the kitchen and made a pot of black coffee.

When it was done, I took two cups and a tray to Mrs. Keene's room, pausing in the hallway as I heard her soft voice. "You should have let me die. Who wants to live like this?"

It puzzles a man how he'll hang on, not wanting to let go of something. Mrs. Keene was remembering her husband without a face, and that blocked everything else from her mind.

Goddard spoke with a tenderness and I looked in. With the dawn light on Goddard's face, I could almost trace his thoughts. He must have been looking at Sheree who had once lain in this room, pale in death, their dead son beside her. Goddard seemed to be examining this image and no longer finding pain in it.

He stood up, and I moved away from the door, feeling that I had intruded. From the room, there came the soft wail of the baby, a piercing sound that carried through the station. A long silence followed, and then I heard Mrs. Keene crying.

People are supposed to cry when they put aside their dead.

In the kitchen, I set the tray on the table and went outside. The east was aflame with light and from the Fort Apache road there was a rising column of dust. I studied it carefully, for this was not made by Apaches. No Apache rode in a column of twos.

FIVE minutes later a lieutenant rode beneath the arch with a handful of troopers. He gave an order to the sergeant and harness creaked as they left the saddle. The lieutenant was tall and lean like a hound that had been run too long and too hard, but there was something fine about the hardness.

"I'd like some water," he said softly, "for my men."

"Help yourself to anything we have," I told him.

"Thank you," he said with a New England twang. The sergeant detailed two troopers to hold horses and the others

went to the well in back. "I imagine you've had a bad night with the Apache scare."

"Not too bad," I said.

"There's two other patrols out," he said. "They're on their way to Santa Rita by now." He slapped his gloves against his thigh and bellowed at the sergeant, "Hurry it up here. No time for a bath."

Goddard came out of the station and stood in the doorway, watching the troopers mount and assemble. They were tired men and dust lay white against the blue of their uniforms. The lieutenant made a small motion with his hand, and the detail left the yard at a walk.

I went inside then and Goddard came in behind me. In Emily Keene's room the baby cried angrily for his breakfast and the woman's tones were soft and soothing, filled with a detached sense of peace.

Goddard sat down at the table and folded his hands. He said, "I never finished that cradle I started."

"Be a good day for it," I said. Now that the time had come I wasn't sure how to say it. "I think I'll ride on, Frank."

His head came up quickly and he looked at me for a full minute. "If you think it's best," he said.

"It's best," I told him. "You can get along without me."

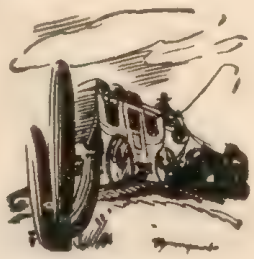
"I'll be all right," he said with a smile, and somehow the years seemed to drop away from him and he was as he had been when I first met him.

At the barn I saddled a sorrel and mounted. I had no bedroll or gear, because I had come with nothing and a man ought to leave the same way. Only I was leaving with something, but it was something that can't be put in a man's pocket.

He was standing by the door when I rode under the arch and he didn't seem tired now. I paused to wave, then thought better of it.

Texas was still a long way away, and who knows—they might have a different sheriff now.

A lot can happen to a man in five years —or one night.



Coming up in the next issue

WAGON TRACKS WEST

Chuck Isbell had to right another man's wrong . . . even if it turned all the ranchers in Arizona against him

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CRIMSON GOLD

Jackie was sure there was treasure to be found in the mine . . . she didn't suspect that death lurked there too

An Exciting Novelette

By AGNES NAFZIGER

YOUNG, BEAUTIFUL Teresa Sullivan came home to

violence and treachery . . . and a lovable thief who wanted her land

Empire West

by PARKER BONNER

PART ONE

TERESA CARMEN BRIDGET SULLIVAN brought the mules around the road's bend at a sharp trot, the bells on their high collar bows making a lively cadence with the sharp pound of their solid hoofs, and the pans in the back of the light wagon adding their rattle to the rhythm.

She was a small girl, whose slight arms held deceptive strength, and she drove with a certainness which showed long acquaintance with animals. But her mind was not on what she was doing, and she failed to notice the deep chuckhole near the side of the road.

The right hand mule avoided it nimbly, but the front

wheel of the wagon struck it squarely. The wood of the wheel was dried out and had shrunk until the steel rim was held in place only by three nails. The jolt broke the last of the nails, the rim slipped sidewise, came free, and rolled boundingly across the brush flat beyond the edge of the road. The wheel collapsed, its aged spokes snapping off at ragged lengths. The pole sheared, halfway between the light neck yoke and the double tree, and the girl was pitched from the seat, to land rolling the scrub brush.

Had the team been horses, they would undoubtedly have bolted, but mules are much smarter than their cousins. They stopped, glad of the excuse, and looked around with blank, curious faces as if to assure the world in general that the accident was none of their making.

Teresa sat up, retrieved her hat, and said damn in a very positive and unladylike manner. She got slowly to her feet, brushing the sand from her clothes, and feeling her body gingerly to make certain that all of the component parts were in their proper positions. She was so engrossed with her inventory that she did not see the rider who came out of the brush on the far side of the road until he had almost reached her. Then she looked up quickly, to find him above her, sitting relaxed and easy in his saddle, laughing down at her.

"What's so darn funny?"

"You looked like a tumbleweed," he told her. "I never saw anyone turn over completely in the air twice and then land neatly on the part of them that is least likely to be permanently injured by the jar."

HER hand strayed toward her back side and then stopped, and a touch of color flooded the smooth oval of her cheeks.

"Whatever else you are," she said, tartly, "you are no gentleman."

His grin widened. "And you're not the first to figure that out, Miss Hammerstead."

She started, opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again slowly. "What makes you call me that?"

His surprise showed, then he glanced at the broken wagon. "Everyone in the Territory knows that peddler's cart. I suppose old Jake has covered more miles across these hills than the whole United States Cavalry. I took you for his daughter."

Her hesitation was only momentary. Then a tiny flame, which might have been hidden mirth, lighted her eyes for an instant and was gone.

"That was a fair guess."

"And where's old Jake?"

"Dead," she said in a low voice. "The Apaches killed him."

Bruce Frazer was genuinely shocked, for he had liked the old peddler.

"When was this?"

"Yesterday. Four of them jumped the stage and killed the horses. The driver got one of the Indians before they killed him. Jake was following the stage, about a mile behind. He left the wagon and mules and crept up over some rocks. He got two more Indians before he was killed."

Bruce Frazer was staring at her. "And what happened to the fourth Apache?"

"I killed him." Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if killing Indians were one of her regular occupations. "Then I heaped some rocks on Jake and the driver, and brought the mules on in."

Bruce Frazer was uncertain whether he believed her or not. There was an elusive something about her words, something that did not seem to ring quite true. And yet, she was driving Jake's wagon, and certainly the old peddler was not with her.

He asked the obvious question. "So what do you intend to do now?"

Teresa Sullivan did not know exactly what she meant to do. The attack by the Indians and the loss of all her baggage when they burned the stage had thoroughly disrupted the vague plan she had made before running away from San Antonio. She slowly shook her head.

Bruce Frazer was practical, if nothing else. "You can't drive on into Rock Springs with that wheel. We can leave the cart and you can ride one of the mules, or we can try to fix a drag."

"Would you?" The black eyes which

Teresa turned on him were large and appealing. The good nuns who had supervised her education at the convent had always been a little concerned about those eyes and the way she used them when there happened to be a male present.

Bruce Frazer softened under their gaze. He realized that she was the prettiest girl he had seen in years, perhaps in his full life. He nodded, and without a word rode across the trail to a rocky shoulder, a quarter of a mile away, where a few twisted pinons had somehow survived.

He found what he wanted, a dead trunk, some six inches through, and snaked it back to the trail at the end of his rope. With an ax from Jake's stock he trimmed it, cutting it to a five-foot length, which he carried to the front of the wagon. Then he chose a large stone, rolled it forward against the axle, and told Teresa to push it under the axle when he lifted the cart.

She started to protest, then looked speculatively at the long heavy back muscles as he stripped off his shirt. He bent, catching two of the broken spokes, and lifted. Slowly the loaded wagon rose until she had room to roll the stone into place.

AFTERWARD he found a wrench in the cart, giving silent thanks that old Jake's stock seemed to include everything a man might need. He removed the hub of the shattered wheel and lashed the drag under the axle. Then he replaced the broken pole with the small end cut from the dead pine.

It was not a finished job, but he thought that with careful nursing he could bring the rig into Rock Springs safely.

"You'd better ride my horse," he told the girl, "and let me struggle with the mules."

Teresa was about to insist indignantly that there were few things he could do that she could not do better. She had enough of her father's blood to make her absolutely certain of herself, and enough of the pride of her mother's people to make her resent any suggestion that she stood in need of help from anyone. But she remembered suddenly the trouble her last imperious act had brought her, and her vow that from now on she would move with far more caution.

TERESA

Meekly she allowed him to help her into the saddle, although she could have easily vaulted onto the horse, and they set out

along the dusty road toward the distant town.

Bruce Frazer had a direct way of approaching things, and before they had much more than started he turned his head and looked at her as she rode beside the wagon. "You got any money?"

Teresa Sullivan was startled. In all of her nineteen years she had never given money more than a passing thought. She had always had more than she could spend.

"Why I . . ." she thought of the cash she had found in the strong box under the wagon seat. She thought of old Jake's dying words as he lay with his head in her lap.

"I've got no kin," he'd said. "Take my cart and mules. They burned the stage, and the stage horses are dead. "Do what you will with the cart."

"I've got a little." She was again thinking of the money in the cart.

"You'll need it," Bruce said. "This country wasn't made for a woman. You can't go driving up and down the old Spanish Trail the way Jake did, from mining camp to mining camp, from ranch to ranch."

Teresa Sullivan decided that this man on the wagon seat was much too dictatorial. "And just why can't I?"

He said, "Your common sense ought to tell you that. You might take the junk in the cart and open a store, but not in Rock Springs."

"And why not in Rock Springs?"

"Because the Grant owns everything in town, and thinks it owns the people around it." His voice was dry, and she looked at him sharply.

"Tell me about this Grant."

He hesitated for the barest second. "You mean old Jake never told you about the DeAndre Grant?"

Her voice was cautious. "He mentioned it, but you tell me."

BRUCE FRAZER made a sweeping gesture with his hand, and his tone was tighter. "You're on the Grant now. It stretches for miles in every direction. No man, not even old Barney Sullivan himself, knew where its exact boundaries lie, but Barney claimed everything north to the crest of the mountains, and south to the banks of the Rio Poco. The old king of Spain who made the original grant wasn't very precise with his limits. Kings had a way of giving largess in those days."

She looked at him curiously. "You sound very bitter."

He shrugged. "Oh, I didn't have anything against Barney Sullivan. He lived like an emperor. He had so many cattle that he couldn't count them, and if the people killed one now and then for beef he didn't care. He ruled this country, but he ruled it with an easy hand. More than a thousand people live on the Grant. Some of them have been here for over forty years, and have never paid more than a token rent. But since Barney died Oscar Ketchel has been running things, and Oscar is a different piece of cloth."

The girl was studying him thoughtfully. "What do you mean by that?"

Bruce Frazer shrugged. "Ketchel was Barney's man of business. He came here fifteen years ago as a kind of bookkeeper. Barney didn't have much of a business head. Barney had been a mountain man, a trapper, who came into Taos with Kit Carson. He was just a kid then, not yet twenty.

"He met Carmen DeAndre and he married her, and her family gave them the Grant as a dowry. The DeAndre family had held it for fifty years and never done anything with it, because of the Indians. But Barney wasn't a man to let a few Indians keep him from what he felt was his. He loaded his bride into a wagon, and with half a dozen men he headed northwest. When the government finally validated the Spanish Grants he became the king of this part of the country."

The girl said in a small voice, "And how did this man Ketchel get possession of the Grant?"

"Lord love you," Bruce Frazer said. "He doesn't own it, at least not yet. Technically it belongs to the Princess."

Teresa Sullivan started. "And who is this Princess?"

Bruce Frazer laughed, but it was not a happy sound. "A spoiled brat, probably. I've never seen her. Few people on the

Grant have ever seen her. Her mother died when she was born, and old Barney sent her back to her mother's people in Taos. But there weren't many of them left. They were mostly killed off in the Pueblo rising, and when her grandmother died the baby was sent to a convent in San Antonio where one of her aunts was a nun."

"I see."

He said, "That isn't the full story. This Oscar Ketchel is a man of parts. He plans carefully, and he is not the kind to let anything escape his reaching fingers. When Barney died, Ketchel produced a will. The will makes him trustee of the Grant until the Princess is twenty-five, or until she marries. And Ketchel wants to make sure that even if she marries he will still be in control. He has a son who is good looking and has a way with him, even if he is a little wild. Ketchel sent his son east with express orders to meet and marry the girl."

Teresa was staring at him, wide-eyed. "You seem to be very well informed."

His grin was mirthless. "In this country a man has to know what is going on if he means to keep alive. And at times Ketchel is careless. He forgets that servants have ears and that those same servants don't like him very well. And he is sure of his power. There is no one to stop him but one young convent-bred girl, who likely hasn't the sense or backbone to stand up for her rights."

He did not look at Teresa as he spoke. Had he done so he might have been surprised by her expression, and by the words that she was whispering to herself.

"We'll see about that," she whispered, and lifted her chin a little higher. "We shall certainly see about that."

THE town of Rock Springs had existed all the years of its life through the courtesy of Barney Sullivan. With a free hand he had given long term leases to any merchant who cared to settle there, but he had held title to the ground. The result was that, although the citizens had built their own houses and had lived in complete security, the land on which they dwelt was actually owned by the Grant.

For himself Barney had raised a huge log house, standing on an upthrust promontory to the north of town so that it overlooked the village and the whole winding valley below.

It was in this main house that Oscar Ketchel had set up his headquarters after Barney's death, and it was from this house that he ruled the rolling miles of valley and upland, of forest and mountain, which made up the Grant.

And to Ketchel the town was a constant and probing goad, for his orderly mind resented the independent merchants who had crept in during Barney's lifetime. The people who traded in Rock Springs lived on the Grant, and Ketchel felt that their trading should be done with the company store, not with individual merchants.

For this reason he had been exerting pressure of one kind and another to drive the independents out of town. Some had resisted, some had tried to fight back, but most—including the owner of the biggest general store—had surrendered, selling out for what Ketchel chose to give them, and departing from Rock Springs.

Jerome Bebe had taken over the general store. Bebe was an import of Ketchel's, a cold, thin man of indeterminate age whose long nose could smell a dollar farther than his shrill voice could carry on the wind.

He climbed the Hill, as it was called, following the dusty track to the log mansion which now housed Ketchel and his immediate lieutenants. Then he mounted the steps and crossed the wide gallery to enter the room which Ketchel had transformed into an office.

Ketchel sat at the desk—big, heavy-shouldered, his face crowned with a head of bushy black hair. He was not old, still in his middle forties, and he retained the vitality of a hungry grizzly.

He was talking to Guy Lambert, his general foreman, and he looked up, annoyed, as Bebe came into the room. "We're busy."

Bebe was used to Ketchel's rudeness, and he gave no sign that the words irritated him. "You're always busy," he said, "but I thought you ought to know that a new store is opening in town."

Ketchel swung his chair around to face Bebe directly. "New store? Who's the fool this time?"

"Remember Jake the peddler, the one who's been touring the country for years in his wagon, handling everything from thread to hardware and pots and pans?"

Ketchel nodded.

"It's his daughter. Seems the Apaches jumped the stage thirty miles east of here. Old Jake and his girl were trailing along behind it. The way I get the story, Jake heard the shooting, grabbed his rifle, and sneaked forward to help. He and the stage driver got killed. Apparently there were no passengers. The girl gets a gun, crawls forward herself, and polishes off the last Indian. Then, since the stage is burned and everyone dead, she drives on in by herself in the cart. But she manages to bust a wheel before she gets here. Bruce Frazer found her on the trail and brought her in."

AT MENTION of Frazer's name, Ketchel stiffened. "That damn miner manages to stick his nose in everywhere. I suppose it was him that set her up in the store?"

"It was him who got Gomez to let her have the empty building next to his saloon. She's open for business this morning, and the prices she's asking are ridiculous—about half what we are getting for the same things."

"She'll go broke."

"Probably, but that peddler's wagon had a heavy load. She'll hurt us before she fails."

Ketchel drummed on the desk top with his big blunt fingers. "All right, I'll take care of it." He rose, reaching for his hat. "Come on, Guy, your face is ugly enough to scare any woman out of town."

Lambert grinned, thin-lipped. He had a long narrow face with brooding eyes and a twisted, cruel mouth. "If she's good looking I'll marry her and take her off your hands."

Ketchel glanced sharply at his foreman, getting Lambert's meaning at once. Guy Lambert was one of the few American employees on the Grant who knew that Ketchel had sent his son to San Antonio with express orders to marry Teresa Sullivan.

"Save your humor."

Lambert chuckled. "I always say marrying is easier than fighting." He winked at Bebe and they followed Ketchel from the room.

Teresa Sullivan was very busy playing at being a storekeeper, but she had not the slightest idea how to price the merchandise which had been in old Jake's cart. She stood behind the rough counter, arguing in Spanish with an olderly Mexican woman who was trying to trade a shawl for a shiny new skillet.

She heard the door open, turned to see the three men entering, then gave her attention back to her customer. But the woman, after one startled glance at Ketchel, seized the shawl and scuttled like a frightened rabbit toward the rear exit.

Teresa stared after her in surprise, then turned to meet the newcomers, managing to put a smile of business welcome on her lips.

"Good morning. May I help you?"

Ketchel was looking at her in blank surprise. It was very seldom that Oscar Ketchel allowed himself the luxury of being caught off guard, but he had certainly not expected old Jake's daughter to look like this.

"You are Miss Hammerstead?"

Teresa lowered her head in a slight nod.

"What's your first name?"

She hesitated for the barest moment, then said in a low voice, "My friends call me Terry."

Ketchel tried to make his tone pleasant. "I'm going to be your friend, Terry. Rock Springs does not need another store. We have too many now. So, if you'll put a reasonable figure on your stock, I'll buy you out."

Teresa opened her eyes wide.

Ketchel said, "I'm only doing this to help you. I've heard about the Indians killing your father, and this country is no place for a girl, believe me. Besides, you'd have few customers. Most of the people here work for the Grant and have to buy their supplies from the company store."

His tone tightened as he talked, and the words brought a trace of resentful color to Teresa's cheeks. "You know, that sounds a little like a threat."

KETCHEL was not used to having anyone talk back to him, but he made an effort to control his temper. "Do you know who I am?"

Teresa had a very good idea who he was, but she shook her head.

"I'm Oscar Ketchel, the manager of the Grant, and no one does business in Rock Springs without my permission."

She said, mildly, "I can hardly believe that, Mr. Ketchel. I thought this was a free country, even if most of it is owned by one person. I'd like to talk with the owner before I decide what to do."

Ketchel still held his temper. He amazed himself by so doing. There was something about this girl that bothered him. He said, evenly, "Under Mr. Sullivan's will I am in complete charge until the owner reaches twenty-five. And let me warn you, I will not offer to buy your stock again. If you want help you will take it now."

She said, steadily, "I am not certain I want to sell."

Suddenly the anger which Ketchel had been so successfully controlling seized him. "All right," he said, "Pitch the stuff out into the street, Guy."

Lambert was surprised by the swift change, but he grinned nevertheless. He had been sizing up the girl ever since they had entered the store, and he liked what he saw. It might be fun to have her homeless and destitute in Rock Springs. It might be fun indeed. He reached quickly for a column of pans which were stacked on the nearest counter.

Bruce Frazer had been sitting quietly behind a pile of boxes at the rear of the store. He stood up now, his six feet uncoiling as he rose, and his even tone halted all movement within the building.

"I wouldn't do that, Guy."

Lambert's fingers were already touching the pans. He froze thus, not turning his head, not daring to drop a hand toward the gun on the belt at his waist.

Ketchel came around, and his dark eyes were hot with anger, although he held it out of his voice. "What are you doing here, Frazer?"

Bruce Frazer said, easily, "I came to buy a couple of shovels. Bebe wants a little too much for tools at the company store."

Ketchel considered him. "Maybe I made a mistake, not running you out of the country."

"Maybe you did." Frazer's tone was lazy. "Especially since you think I'm cheating the Grant out of its share of the silver."

"You know you are."

"Prove it."

They stared at each other, and Teresa Sullivan, watching them, had the conviction that she was entirely forgotten, that as far as both men were concerned this fight was purely between them and not brought on by Ketchel's attempt to evict her from the store.

"I'll do that," said Ketchel. "And then I'll see that they hang you to the nearest tree."

BRUCE FRAZER laughed. There was something lighthearted about the sound, something mocking, as if he were daring both Ketchel and Lambert to take up the fight now.

"Oscar," he said, "that's your weakness. You always say 'we.' You always depend on someone else to do your dirty work. That habit will trip you in the end. No robber can depend on someone else to do what he should do for himself, because the type of men who work for a thief are themselves thieves by instinct, if not by practice."

Ketchel was nearly purple. "Are you calling me a thief?"

"As you've called me several times." Frazer's eyes were smiling, but there was a bleakness about them which glittered in the uneven light of the room. "There's an old saying, it takes a thief to catch a thief. We might amend that to read, it takes a thief to recognize another. Maybe we should get together. Maybe we should split the Grant between us. There's enough of it for both."

Teresa was gasping. Neither of the men

paid her the slightest attention. Frazer moved forward slowly, closing the gap between him and Lambert. He moved like a stalking cat, sure-footed, on balance, his hand only inches from the deadly gun at his side. This was a new person, not the helpful man who had met her on the trail, not the man who had arranged with Gomez for her to use this store and then unloaded the goods from the cart. This man was dangerous.

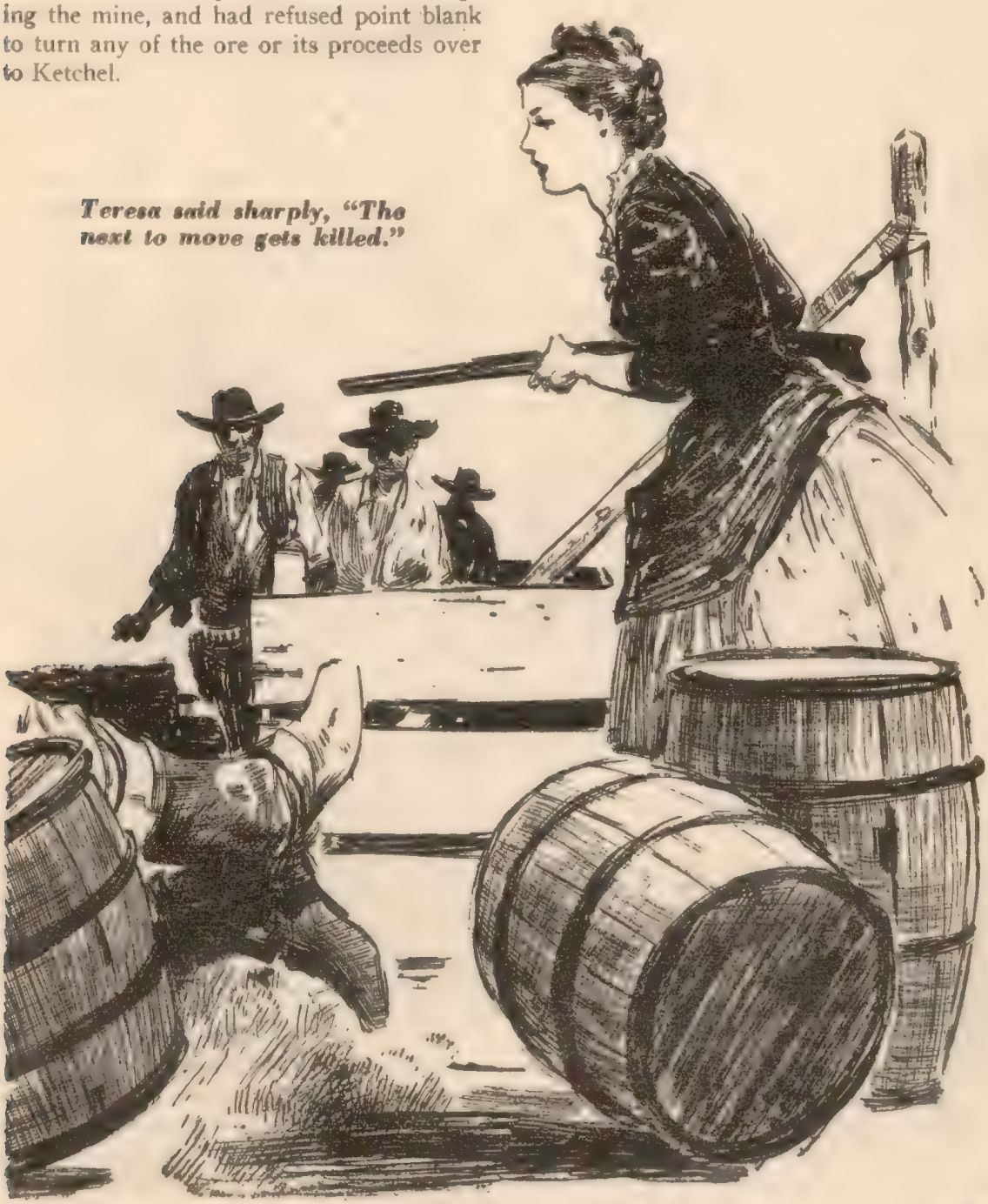
Ketchel sensed the same thing. He was realizing that he had underrated Frazer, that he should have had him killed before now.

When old Barney had first mentioned the old Spanish silver workings which he had discovered in the Devil's Canyon far to the north, it had seemed a wise move to lease them to Frazer and his partner. They were experienced miners, and they showed no fear of the small wandering bands of Apach-

es, nor of the Utes who sometimes sallied down from the north.

But, from the first, Ketchel had feared Frazer's influence with Barney Sullivan, and after the old man's death he had had nothing but trouble with the miners. Frazer insisted that he and Barney had had an agreement that the silver dug from the old tunnels should be spent in further developing the mine, and had refused point blank to turn any of the ore or its proceeds over to Ketchel.

Several times the Grant manager had almost decided to run the miners out. But he had been occupied with consolidating his own position on the Grant, with trying to evict the squatters whom Barney had tolerated, and with building up a gun crew of American riders loyal only to himself. So he had put off a showdown with Frazer.



Teresa said sharply, "The next to move gets killed."

He said evenly, "Your lease runs for only two months more, and it will not be renewed. I will demand a strict accounting before you leave."

Frazer laughed. "There'll be an accounting, Oscar, but maybe not the kind that you're expecting. And one thing more—" His tone lost its mockery and hardened. "This is a personal warning. Leave this store alone. If I hear that anyone, and I mean anyone, has bothered Miss Hammerstead after I go back to the mine, I'll come down shooting. Now, get out."

They did not move.

DELIBERATELY he drew and cocked his single action gun, the click sounding sharp in the quiet store. "I said get out. A lot of people on this Grant would think I was a hero if I shot you down. Don't tempt me. Don't give me the defence that I caught you bullying a woman."

They went. Neither Lambert nor Ketchel were easily cowed, but both knew that Bruce Frazer meant exactly what he said. So did the girl, and her voice held a trace of wonder as she said, "You'd have shot them down . . . in cold blood."

He was still watching the empty doorway to make certain that Ketchel and Lambert had not paused outside. "You shot the Indian."

"That was different." She sounded angry. "The Indians had killed the stage driver and old Jake."

"Ketchel has done worse than kill a couple of men." His tone was bitter. "He's evicting a whole people. He's moving the Mexicans who for nearly three generations lived on this land and worked for Barney Sullivan. He's moving them because he knows that their loyalty is to the Sullivans, not to him. If that Sullivan girl had half the backbone of her father she'd have come home months ago and thrown Ketchel and his wolves out on their necks."

"Maybe she didn't know."

Frazer grunted. "She knows her father is dead and that she owns one of the largest hunks of real estate held by a single individual anywhere in the world."

She stared at him with angry eyes. "And who are you to talk? Only a few minutes ago you as much as admitted that you are busy stealing the Grant's share in the silver that you are mining."

He shoved the gun back into its holster and mocked her with his eyes. "Maybe I'm only saving it. Maybe I'm going to cast it in a nice big ball and roll it down to San Antonio and dump it in Miss Sullivan's lap. A big ball of silver might impress her. She might even decide to marry me instead of marrying the Ketchel cub."

She said, quickly, "You don't mean that."

"Why not?" He was still mocking her.

"You've never even seen her. You don't know what she looks like."

He pretended to be vastly surprised. "What's that got to do with it? I'm a thief, and she owns the Grant, and she is one of the great heiresses in the world. Maybe she's cross-eyed, maybe she has buck teeth. Who cares as long as she owns the Grant?"

"You're impossible."

He was looking down at her, grinning slightly. "I'll admit that a man would rather she had your looks. It's too bad you couldn't have been the Princess instead of a mere peddler's daughter. I think I'd enjoy kissing you."

She said fiercely, "You wouldn't dare," and at once knew that she had said the wrong thing. His long arms shot out, caught her under the elbows, and lifted her easily over the counter. She struggled, beating at his face with her small fists, but it did no good. He was too strong for her. His lips were on hers, still curved with their cold smile. Then there was a subtle change as she suddenly was quiet in his arms, and there was a warmth, a tenderness about him as he let her go which had not been present a moment before.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

She was staring at him, wordless, as if she had never seen him before.

He met her look for a long moment. "I'm sorry," he repeated the phrase. "I'm no better than Ketchel." He turned then, and left her without a word. Slowly she followed him to the door and watched him

stalk across the small plaza. There was a thoughtful light in her dark eyes which had not been there before.

TERESA SULLIVAN was alone in the shop when the woman entered, and she gave her no more than a passing glance as she went ahead arranging some bolt goods. Most of the inhabitants of Rock Springs were Spanish speaking, descendants of the people Barney Sullivan had brought to the Grant. Judging by her dress, the newcomer was one of these.

But finally Teresa became conscious that the woman was staring at her with more than casual interest, and lifted her eyes questioningly.

Suddenly the customer said, "I am Juanita."

Teresa nodded without interest. Her mind was still occupied with Bruce Frazer. "What can I do for you?" she asked in Spanish.

"You do not remember me, chiquita?"

Teresa's eyes widened.

"It was I who took you to Taos, and then to San Antonio."

"You were father's housekeeper?"

The woman nodded. "And before that your nurse, and before that your mother's. You look much like her, little one. So much that I could not make the mistake."

Teresa glanced around quickly. The store was empty, but still she lowered her voice. "Then others are apt to recognize me?"

Juanita shrugged. "Perhaps not. None knew your mother as I did, certainly none of the Americans ever saw her. Our own people will not talk about you, even if they know who you are. They do not like the Senor Ketchel."

"You do not like Ketchel?"

The woman spat. "Does one like a coyote that sneaks about, gnawing the bones when the master is dead? But how is it that you come here, that you have this shop? That you are called Hammerstead? This I do not understand."

Teresa told her. It was a relief to talk. She felt like a bottle which has been corked too tight. "Young Frank Ketchel came to San Antonio to see me, at the school. He said that he came to bring the report of his father on how the Grant was being managed.

"I liked him. He was gay, and I was lonely. But my aunt did not. I thought her dislike was because he was American, not of Spanish blood.

"But he told me stories of my father, and of this country. I wished to see it again, quickly. Then he explained that his father was the administrator until I was twenty-five, or until I married. I guess that was the first time I thought of marrying him. He must have hoped to plant the thought in my mind.

"I saw him half a dozen times. Then he said that he must leave, and I begged him to take me with him."

The older woman made a disapproving sound with her pursed lips.

Teresa ignored it. "I suggested that we be married, that we run away to be married. I knew Aunt Filipa would not consent otherwise. I slipped from the convent one night, after dark, and Frank met me with a buggy. It was then he told me that we would be married by a judge, that because of my aunt he dared not approach a priest. I was horrified, and when he stopped outside a hotel and went inside I was suddenly frightened. I was sure then that I had made a mistake. But what could I do? I felt that I would be punished if I went back to the convent, that I was disgraced. So instead I drove to the stage station. Fortunately there was a stage just leaving for El Paso del Norte. Then I came on here. After all, this is my home. The Grant does belong to me."

JUANITA asked, "But this store, this Hammerstead name?"

"I'm coming to that," the girl told her. "I was the only passenger on the stage north from Sante Fe. When the Indians attacked, the driver whipped up his horses and yelled for me to jump. I did, from the off side, and apparently the Indians never saw me as the stage went on over the hill. Then the peddler came along. He'd heard the shots. I told him what had happened.

He left his cart and wagon with me and crept after the stage.

"I followed him. From the crest I could see the stage horses and driver dead, and one Indian down. The others were burning the stage. The peddler killed two more Indians before they got him, then I grabbed the rifle and killed the last one."

There was an exclamation of muffled horror from Juanita.

Teresa appeared not to notice. "The peddler was badly hurt, but not quite dead. I made him as comfortable as I could, brought up the cart and made coffee. He told me who he was. He said that he had no relatives, and that the cart and mules were mine. He died with his head resting in my lap."

Juanita emitted another moaning cry, as if she were suffering at thought of what the girl had gone through. But Teresa was not feeling sorry for herself. She came of a race which had for generations met their troubles head-on and gloried in their ability to fight.

"Then I drove the mules on toward Rock Springs," she continued, "but I broke a wheel just out of town and Bruce Frazer helped me. It was he who thought I was old Jake's daughter and I did not correct his mistake. Then he said several things about the Grant and about Mr. Ketchel which worried me, so I decided to remain the peddler's daughter until I found out the truth."

Juanita was staring at her helplessly. "Child, I wish you hadn't come here. I want you to go away before you get in further trouble."

Teresa's small jaw set. "And why should I run away? This is my home. The Grant belongs to me."

"Sometimes," Juanita warned her. "It is better to be alive than to have riches. This Ketchel is a bad man. There is nothing he would not do to get his hands on the Grant. You are alone. Your family is mostly dead. There is none to help you here."

Teresa was not listening. "Where do you live?"

"I have a small house at the end of the street. Ketchel wanted me to stay at the big place and run it for him, but I said no. After Don Bernard died it was not the same. It will never be the same again."

"Yes it will," Teresa told her. "I'm coming to live with you until it is. I don't like the hotel, and a girl should not live by herself."

The woman's eyes shone and her old face softened. "It is my prayers that are answered. My baby has come home."

Teresa warned her. "I am not a baby, and I will probably do a number of things that you will not approve of. You will tell no one who I am until I give you leave. Is that understood?"

Juanita nodded.

Teresa pulled open the cash drawer and took out some money. "You will get the things we need. My baggage was burned on the stage."

THE woman nodded and went away, and Teresa spent a lonely afternoon in the store. It did not occur to her to wonder why she did not have customers after the morning rush, nor did she realize that Ketchel and Bebe had passed the word that anyone caught trading with her would be refused further credit at the company store.

At five o'clock she locked the door and made her way to Juanita's small house, at the far end of the sunbaked plaza. The whole town was built around this common. Above it, the big house with its squared, rough-hewn logs and mud-filled cracks stood by itself on the timbered hillside.

She looked up at it wistfully. She did not remember the house, but this had been her home. Nor did she remember her mother, and her only real knowledge of her father had come from his few short visits to the convent.

He had been very tall, thin, and wiry, with an Irish face and a shock of stiff snow-white hair. But he had written to her often, for Barney Sullivan had been a lonely man after his wife's death. He had poured out his heart to his daughter, feeling free to say things on paper which would never have passed his lips.

From these letters she knew how much

he had loved the Grant, and the country, and his people, and this love had been infused in her. She had looked forward through the years to the time when she would be old enough to come here, to make a home for him.

And now he was dead, and the Grant was threatened, and the peace and quiet and security she had dreamed of no longer existed. She turned into Juanita's small, white-washed front room, clean and shining. The woman hovered about anxiously, like a mother hen who has suddenly had a lost chick returned to her.

Juanita made Teresa sit down, and brought her the steaming bowl of meat and beans and corn tortillas, crisp from the cooking hearth. Then she stood by, beaming as the girl ate, refusing to join her at the scrubbed table.

"Mutton," she said. "We will have mutton again tomorrow, and at the end of the week a piece of beef. I know a man who will kill a steer."

Teresa looked at her. "A steer, one of the steers belonging to the Grant?"

Juanita's face lost its look of happy content. "And why not? Are not all the animals on the Grant yours? Who has the better right to eat DeAndre beef—you or that fat pig of a Ketchel who fills his big belly morning, noon, and night?"

Teresa did not want to talk about Ketchel at the moment. She pushed away the empty bowl and sighed gently. "Juanita, tell me—have I any real friends here, people I can trust because of my family, because of who I am?"

The old woman shook her head. "None but our own people, and there is little they can do to help. They have lost their jobs, their livelihood, their places. The Señor Ketchel no longer uses them on the range. He has brought in gun fighters, and there is bad trouble coming, I think. He will try to send us all away, and where can we go? The only homes we know are here."

Teresa stared at her, wonderingly. "Is there no one who even tries to stand against him?"

Juanita's expression brightened for a moment. "There is Don Bruce. Don Bruce laughs at Ketchel. He laughs at everyone, and he is not afraid."

"He's a thief," Teresa said, but she sounded as if she wanted Juanita to prove her wrong.

INSTEAD the old woman shrugged expressively, and there was the wisdom of nearly seventy years in her voice. "That I do not know. He handles the silver, and does not give it to the Grant as Ketchel asks. Who can tell what he does with it? But I like him. He is happy. He sings as he rides through the streets. Your father liked him. Your father used to laugh and say that he would probably come to no good end, but that he would have great fun getting there."

"He'll probably get himself killed." Teresa sounded unhappy, and the old woman studied her with narrowed eyes.

"I think not, maybe. This Don Bruce is the kind that takes much killing. If I were the Senor Ketchel, I would worry sometimes in the dark night when sleep is hard to come . . ."

She broke off, for there was the sudden whip-like spat of a shot from the far side of the plaza.

Both women started. Then they heard the hoarse voice of Guy Lambert rasping through the soft night.

"Watch it, Tap. He's in the corner building. Don't let him get away."

Juanita moaned. "It must be Don Bruce. They have him."

The rifle which had belonged to old Jake stood in a corner of the room where it had been placed by the *mozo* who had brought it from Teresa's hotel. The girl never hesitated. She ran across, caught it up, and wheeled toward the door.

"No." Juanita moved with surprising speed for one of her age. "Don't go out there, little one. Those men have no honor. They will kill you."

Teresa wasted no words in argument. Instead she turned, and quickly blew out the light. Afterward she pushed the still-protesting Juanita out of her way and carefully opened the door. There was a moon, riding high in the cloud-fleeced sky, light-

ing the dusty plaza with a soft yellow light.

The place was deserted save for Lambert's men, for the town's inhabitants had learned during this last year that as soon as trouble started the safest place for them was behind their barred doors.

Lambert and four men stood behind a corner of the saloon, protected from the building beyond the livery by the heavy adobe wall. Their backs were toward Teresa, and they apparently had no thought of an attack from their rear. Their own arrogance, plus the knowledge that they had successfully cowed the townspeople for the last months, made them over-confident.

Teresa did not move at once. Like a good general she stood in the shadows of the house doorway, studying the full situation.

As she waited she heard Lambert say, "No hurry. His horse is still in the livery. He can't get to it without our seeing him. For once we've got Mr. Bruce Frazer in a box, and this time he doesn't get away in one piece."

Teresa was waiting to see whether Lambert had any other men hidden in the surrounding buildings, before she made her move. But, although she stood quiet for several minutes, she saw no one else in the silent shadows.

The men about Lambert were getting restless.

Tap Dunkin said, "I can slip around to the north and smoke him out."

Lambert did not answer. Instead he leaned around the corner of the wall and threw a shot at the house. There was a flash in return, and the bullet struck the angle of the wall close to Lambert's head and went whining away through the night.

Lambert sounded pleased. "He's still there. That's what I wanted to know. All right, Tap, slip around to the north and keep him throwing lead at you while we sneak into the livery barn."

One of the men moved, but Teresa stepped into the square, her rifle covering them all.

"No," she said. "You will all stay exactly where you are.

BRUCE FRAZER had kept out of sight all during the hot afternoon. The room in which he rested was thick walled, the windows so narrow that very little air came through them. He was not hiding because he was afraid of Ketchel. He did not believe that the ranch manager would actually attack him openly in town. Not that he did not realize how dangerous Ketchel was, but he believed that the man would not make any open move until he heard that his son was safely married to the heiress of the Grant.

But he did not know that Ketchel had ridden out toward one of the line camps and that only Guy Lambert and four members of the crew remained at the big log house.

As darkness settled over the plaza, quiet figures stole along the rim of its dusty heart and slipped quietly into the room in which Frazer had been waiting. The word had gone out that he wanted to talk to them in private and they had delayed only for darkness before joining him.

He greeted each man who entered with a small nod, but did not speak until the last had taken his place in the circle, squatting around the walls. But he studied them as they appeared, feeling relief that none of them had refused his call.

There were seven men in the circle, men who had been the leaders of the Grant people during Barney Sullivan's time, men who were no longer young but whose word was respected by their kind.

The Indian strain showed plainly in these faces, for these were the descendents of the neophytes with which the Spaniards had peopled their early missions. A gentle people, loyal and forebearing, they were now puzzled and confused and fearful, made so by the happenings which had rocked their small world since Sullivan's death.

Their patron was gone. His steady hand had steered most of their lives since their earliest memory. Now the man who sat in his house and gave the orders on the Grant was driving them from their jobs, evicting them from their homes, and preparing to drive them from that part of the country.

Rebellion against his orders was not

something they would have thought of for themselves. Rebellion against authority was not a part of their heritage. But in Frazer they recognized by instinct a man stronger than themselves, a man they could follow.

Ramon Ortega had been major domo on the Grant for ten full years before Sullivan's death. It was he who served as spokesman now, clearing his throat and speaking in the soft slurring phrases of his people.

"We know that you have problems of your own, Don Bruce, and we hesitate to burden you with our small troubles, but the word has been passed that before winter all who have lived on the Grant must move away."

Bruce Frazer's tone told nothing of his inner feelings. "So I have been informed."

Ramon's old eyes were soft with pleading. "But where is it that we are supposed to go? Our children and grandchildren have been born here. This is our home. We know no other place, and Don Bernard had promised us that we would remain here always."

FRAZER hesitated, wondering what he should say, and the old man took his hesitation for a sign of disbelief. "I assure you that I speak nothing but the truth. Many times in my presence Don Bernard made that promise."

"I know it." Bruce Frazer's quick mind was considering the situation and thinking how it could be fitted into his own plans.

"And I am sure that if the little patroness could but understand her father's wishes she would not require that we leave."

"The little patroness," Frazer said, "is a long way from here, and she is to be married to Ketchel's son. Who do you think she will listen to, you or her husband?"

They thought this over in silence. It was a land in which time flowed slowly and where a man never came to a hasty decision. Frazer understood this, and he made no effort to hurry them, sitting quiet through the minutes before Ramon answered.

"Then it is hopeless," the old man said. "There is nothing that we can do."

"I didn't say that. There are many things that a man can do, but I will tell you what I intend to do. I had a contract with Don Bernard. It was understood that I would open up the old mines. It was my gamble. I brought in my own men and paid for my own supplies. The contract read to run three years, and any ore I found during that period was to be sold and the money used to develop the mines further. It was understood also that if at the end of three years I *had* so developed the mine, I could renew the contract for as long as I wished. Of any silver dug from that time, half was to belong to me, half to the Grant."

They listened. In the low light from the single lamp their eyes never left his face.

"Now Don Bernard is dead, and Ketchel demands half of the silver I have already dug. I spent it, developing the mine, but he pretends not to believe me, and he refuses to renew my contract which has only two more months to run."

Still they watched, with no change of expression.

His voice hardened. "I have no intention of throwing away three years' work, of leaving the mine at the end of two months. Mr. Ketchel is going to find an unpleasant surprise when he moves to evict me. I've filed a mineral claim on those mines."

They did not understand what he was talking about. The law of the country in which they lived was a foreign thing, a thing they did not understand and of which they were unconsciously afraid. They blinked at him and he grinned in return.

"The mines, as you all know, are well to the north, in Big Diablo Canyon, just under the summit. The northern boundary of the Grant has never been surveyed properly and won't be for years and years. The country is too rough, and no one is enough interested to pay for such a survey, but there is real doubt that the mines are on the Grant at all."

He knew that they still were not understanding him, but they were getting enough for his purpose.

"If the mines aren't within the boundaries of the Grant they are then on govern-

ment land, and open to mineral entry. So, the question is, who owns the Diablo Mines, the Grant or Bruce Frazer?"

They continued to blink at him.

"My contention is that I own them, and it's a contention I will fight for, either in court or with a gun. It will probably be taken to court, but, if it is, my lawyers will keep it there for years. During those years I will remain in possession, and I mean to go ahead getting out ore. I have twenty men. Most of them aren't miners, most of them weren't hired for digging but because they know how to handle a gun."

THEY understood what he was talking about now. He was talking about a fight, and several shy grins lighted the solemn faces for a moment, then were gone.

"I need men," he said, "a lot of men, to work the mine. You people are being driven from your homes. Come north with me. I promise to take care of you, as Don Bernard would have cared for you. I promise to house you, and feed you, and to protect you from Ketchel and his killers." He stopped, watching their reactions. This was what he had come to Rock Springs to say, why he had waited all during the long hot afternoon. He did not expect an answer tonight, or even on the morrow. He would probably never have an official answer from them.

But the word would be whispered from one adobe house to the next, and gradually, man by man, family by family, they would drift north to see how much truth there was in what he told them.

He dismissed them then, watching them slip from the room as single shadows, silently as they had entered, hoping that they would not be seen by any of Ketchel's men.

But they had already been observed. In every community there is always one spy, one weakling. In this case he was nameless, a half-grown boy, not too bright, whom Jerome Bebe employed about the store and who kept Bebe more or less informed of what his people were doing.

The men had hardly joined Frazer in the house before Bebe had the word from the boy, and was hastily climbing the hill in search of Ketchel. He found not Ketchel but Guy Lambert and Tap Dunkin in the big office, their feet on the desk, an open bottle of whisky between them.

There were two other riders in the room, all drinking, telling their age-old stories of the border country. Lambert heard the sound of the door. He turned, saw Bebe come in, and frowned.

There was little love between him and the storekeeper. They were men out of different molds, whose lives had been set in different channels. But they had one thing in common: a greed which held them steadfast to Oscar Ketchel in the hope that once he had secured himself on the Grant he could make their fortunes for them.

"What is it?" Lambert made no attempt to offer the storekeeper a drink.

"It's Frazer. He's still in town, and he's meeting secretly with the leaders of the Mexicans. They must be cooking up something."

Lambert considered this.

Bebe was insistent. "That Frazer is dangerous to all of us. He's got to go."

With this Lambert agreed.

"Where's the boss?"

"He rode out to one of the line camps. Maybe it's a good thing he isn't here. I've been wanting to give Frazer a lesson. Come on, boys, we can use some fun."

They followed the storekeeper back down the hill, arriving at the edge of the plaza just as the last of the Mexicans slipped from the house and faded into the shadows of the rear street.

BRUCE FRAZER had waited until the last of his visitors was well gone, giving him time to get under cover. He was not expecting trouble, but he did not want any of the men to be with him if trouble came.

He had stepped into the house doorway, intending to go to the livery after his horse, when he saw the four men come around the corner.

The shot he threw at them was entirely instinctive, for he sensed at once that they were after him, and he ducked back into the room even as Lambert's voice cut across

the night. He grinned, but there was no mirth in him, for he realized that he was nicely caught. He had been careless, and he could hear Pop Ober's grumbling voice issuing its warning before he had left the mine.

"You're a fool to go into Rock Springs," his partner had said. "It's like walking into a cave and inviting a grizzly to take the first bite."

But he was here, and apparently he had misjudged Ketchel. He could think of no one in the town who would be fool enough to come to his aid. He inspected the rooms behind him with a quick, careful glance. There were only two, and there was no rear exit. The paneless windows were too narrow to permit the passage of his body.

Someone fired from behind the shoulder of the wall, and he snapped a shot in return. Then he could hear them whispering in the sudden quiet of the night, and a good deal later he heard the girl's voice, speaking clear and unhurried and apparently without fear, telling them not to move, to hold their places.

He had for the moment forgotten her existence, and he chuckled aloud in real relief. Then he heard her call his name, and he came through the door and around the end of the wall to where she held the men under her gun.

She seemed as unconcerned as if she had been doing things of this kind all her life. He got their guns, hearing Guy Lambert swear in a monotone, meeting Tap Dunkin's murderous eyes. He tossed their weapons across the plaza, laughing at their rage.

"When you're hunting a lion it's wise to keep an eye on your back trail, boys."

Lambert swore. The liquor in him, plus his dislike of Frazer, made him say harshly, "It's nice to have a woman fight your battles for you, even if she is nothing but a peddler's brat."

Frazer had been just lifting the gun from Tap Dunkin. He stopped, turned slightly, and said in an even tone, "Watch your tongue, Guy."

Lambert cursed him and the girl.

Frazer hit him. It was not a hard blow, more a backhanded swipe, instinctive and without plan, but it infuriated Lambert all the more. He charged, ignoring the girl's rifle, swinging both his fists for Frazer's head.

His men surged forward, but Teresa fired into the dirt at their feet, saying sharply, unexcitedly, "The next to move gets killed."

THEY stopped, but neither Frazer nor Lambert heard her, for Frazer had ducked inside the big foreman's swinging arms and buried a fist deep into Lambert's stomach.

The blow drove the wind out of the man, bending him forward in sharp pain, but he had enough sense left to wrap his enormous arms around Frazer's lighter shoulders, enveloping him in a bear hug which took them to the ground together.

They rolled, Lambert trying to retain his grip, Frazer striving desperately to break it before it squeezed the wind from his body. Over and over they went in the red dust which rose in waves nearly thick enough to choke them.

Lambert was the heavier, and he tightened his grip as if his arms were the jaws of a vice, squeezing until it seemed to Frazer that his aching ribs must collapse. He had recovered from the first shock of the attack, and his mind was clear enough to make him realize that he could not stand that pressure for long.

He went slack in the man's grasp, falling over onto his back, and had a momentary glimpse of the triumphant look on the face above him. Then Lambert made a mistake. He released his grip and reached for Frazer's throat, certain that he had already won.

Frazer hit him then. He hit him in the side of the neck, and watched the man's big head snap and the eyes roll crazily for an instant. In that instant Frazer managed to throw off the smothering weight, roll from under the heavier man, and come up on his knees.

As he rose, his gun slipped from its holster and fell to the dust. But he had no time

to retrieve it, for Lambert was rising also, struggling upward, shaking his head like an enraged bull.

He charged, again flailing with both arms, but this time Frazer stepped away, evading the roundhouse blows, and drove his left and then his right over the man's bulky shoulders, counterpunching effectively.

He was faster than Lambert, and he danced around the foreman, sparring with his darting left to keep the heavier man off balance, waiting for Lambert to drop his shoulder as he threw a punch, and then coming in with a quick, looping, overhand right directly to the face.

Lambert's nose was puffed, his eyes swelled almost shut. He charged again and again, and each time the flicking left darted in, and when he strove to knock it aside the right crashed over his guard into his sodden face.

He was a barroom fighter without equal, and more than one man along the border had been crippled permanently by the pressing force of his arms. But all of his strength was useless against this phantom who danced in and out, throwing blows with the darting speed of a well-played rapier.

Lambert stopped. He stood, glaring at his adversary over the obstruction of his puffy cheeks. "Come on and fight."

Frazer laughed at him through his own bruised lips.

Lambert took a step forward toward his elusive opponent, and his boot struck the gun which had slipped from Frazer's holster. Quickly he dropped to his knees, trying to scoop up the gun.

The girl shouted a wordless warning, but Frazer was already moving. He jumped in, and brought the spiked heel of his riding boot down squarely on the back of Lambert's outstretched hand, purposely twisting his weight fully on the heel until it threatened to bore through both flesh and bone.

The quick, stabbing pain brought a huge shout out of Lambert. He forgot the gun, the fight. He clawed at the boot heel with his free hand, and then, as Frazer lifted his weight to the other foot, he rolled free, grabbing his injured hand with his good one and rolling back and forth in agony.

FRAZER stooped and caught up his gun. He looked at the squirming foreman with eyes which were bleak and held no sympathy. Then he glanced at the riders held steady by the girl's threatening rifle.

"Get him out of here."

They moved sullenly to obey. Teresa watched them in silence. Not until they had crossed the plaza, half carrying, half leading the battered man did she say, "Was it necessary to break his hand?"

Frazer wiped his battered mouth with the back of his none-too-clean fingers. "There's only one thing that crowd understands: force. Don't waste sorrow on Lambert. If you hadn't showed up with that rifle I'd be dead, and not one of them would be crying for me."

She stared after the departed men. Now that the need for action had passed she was suffering a delayed shock. "It doesn't seem possible. There must be a law in this country, somewhere."

He said, soberly, "The only law north of the Rio Poco is Ketchel's word. Don't ever look for any outside help, for you will find none here. The Grant has settled its own quarrels for nearly forty years and it will keep on settling them until it is broken up."

She said quickly, "Broken up?"

He nodded. "The whole idea of this Grant is contrary to our way of living in this country. It has its roots in the European feudal system. Why should this Sullivan girl, who has ever seen this place since she can remember, hold the power of life and death over a thousand people merely because a king of Spain in a careless moment gave this ground to one of her ancestors?"

Her dark eyes showed sudden anger, but she managed to fight it down so she could speak normally. "You sound as if you mean to try and break up the Grant."

He nodded, "I do. I'm taking the silver mines first. After that, we'll see."

She was staring at him in amazement. "So you are a thief, just as Ketchel called you?"

He shrugged. "Incidentally, you can't stay here, not after having saved my life tonight. I'll have to take you with me. Ketchel isn't above attacking a woman."

She said, "I can take care of myself. Doesn't what I did tonight prove that to you?"

He nodded. "I haven't thanked you, either." Before she realized what he meant to do he had taken a step forward and gathered her in his arms, and was kissing her as he had kissed her that morning. But there was a difference, for suddenly Teresa realized that she was returning his kiss with interest.

The knowledge shocked her, and she broke away.

He said in a shaken voice, "I . . . you . . . you're coming with me."

"I'm not," she said. "The last I heard of you this morning you were talking about marrying the Princess."

He laughed. "I was joking. I said that was one way of getting the Grant."

"Marry her," Teresa told him, sharply. "Marry her if you can." She turned then and fled across the plaza, and her small form was swallowed up by the shadows.

He called after her, started to follow, then stopped. He did not want to leave the girl alone in Rock Springs, although he did not actually believe that even Ketchel would attack her bodily. But he could hardly drag her away by force. He had only seen her three times, but he knew already that she was a person who would never forgive him if he made her accompany him to the mines.

And he had to get out of town. It would only be a matter of minutes before Lambert's men would rearm themselves and come hunting him. He turned into the livery and got his horse. When he came out he again called her name. There was no answer. He did not know in which adobe house she was hiding. There was nothing he could do but ride away.

Teresa watched him from the shadowed doorway of Juanita's house. She did not move until the steady drum of his horse's hoofs was lost in the distance. Nor did she at once go into the house. Instead she stayed in the darkness, lost in her own thoughts.

This is absurd, she thought. I've only seen him three times. Why did I kiss him back? I can't be in love with him. He is a thief, he admits that he means to steal the Grant from me. I can't love him. I can't, but she knew that she was lying to herself. Love was not something which you found by hunting for it consciously. It sneaked up on you and took you unaware.

THE main buildings of the Diablo Mines sat in the bottom of a steep canyon which wound its way upward toward the crest of the Sangre de Cristos. It was a rugged country, a country of stark beauty and savage heights, a country which only a few men had ever seen.

Frazer came into the canyon's mouth and had progressed less than a quarter of a mile before he was challenged. He pulled up at once and saw a man with a rifle rise from his hiding place behind some rocks far up the canyon wall. He called his greeting and was recognized.

It would, he thought, be difficult for Ketchel's men to reach the mine. Certainly they would not reach it unobserved. He rode on then, up the five miles of twisting trail, at times so narrow that there was scarcely room for his horse to pass without stepping into the raging waters of the creek.

Pop Ober came out of the new mill as he rode up. Relief loosened the wrinkled face and brought a quick smile to the old lips.

Pop had been in the Territory since before the war, and he had mined in a hundred places, fighting off Indians with one hand while he swung a single-jack with the other. It was his experience and knowledge which had opened up the old shafts and directed the driving of the new haulage tunnel to strike the ore body lower down and allow them to stope upward along the pitch of the vein.

"I was beginning to worry," he said, as Frazer swung down. "I figured that I'd

have to take the men and go burn that rat Ketchel out of Rock Springs."

Frazer nodded. "You almost had to. They boxed me last night, and if it hadn't been for the peddler's girl, Guy Lambert would have counted coup on me."

Pop looked at his battered face. "Seems you must have had a little argument."

Frazer told him what had happened, of meeting the girl on the road, of fixing the cart and setting her up in the store. Then he told about his meeting with the Mexicans.

"They won't come today," he said, "or tomorrow for that matter. Time doesn't mean much to these people, but a few will drift up here to see, and if they are well treated the word will get back and more will come. We'll get our miners, Pop, don't worry about that."

The old man shook his head. "If we don't get run off before we have a chance to dig the ore we have blocked out." He turned to look at the new mill which stood at the foot of the hill above them, at the flume on the right which brought water from the small lake behind the log dam they had built at the head of the canyon. "We've put a lot of work in here."

"More than you would have done if I'd left you alone?"

The old man nodded. "A lot more, and you know it. My idea would have been to get out the ore in sight when we'd cleaned the old workings. I never liked the idea of leasing from Sullivan. I don't like working another man's property. There's too much chance that he might throw you off just when you strike the real pay ore.

"But no, you said that the thing to do was to drive a new tunnel, block the ore out properly, and build a mill, so that when we really start mining we'll make a decent profit on every ton of ore we raise."

FRAZER smiled faintly. "What's wrong with that?"

Pop shoved his battered hat far back on his grey head. He was over six feet, but years of working underground had stooped him until his back was like a bow, his thin shoulders thrust forward.

"Nothing's wrong with it, I guess, but we've spent every nickel we've made in these years on this mill and the tunnel and the dam. If we were thrown off tomorrow we'd be dead broke."

Frazer nodded. "That's the chance I took. But after I talked to Sullivan last year, he agreed with me that there were two ways we could handle the mine. We could have cleaned out the old workings and quit when they were exhausted, or we could do as we have, developed the mine properly as we went along."

The old man grunted. "That was all fine as long as Sullivan was alive, as long as we had his word that our contract would be extended. Trouble is, you didn't get that on paper."

"That was my mistake," Frazier admitted. "But it never occurred to me that the old man would die."

"But he did," said Pop. "And our contract has only two more months to run. After that Ketchell will throw us out on our necks. Then where are we?"

Frazer grinned. "We are right here. I went to Sante Fe and talked to our lawyer, and we filed on this canyon at the land office—filed a mineral claim."

Pop stared at him. "You what?"

Frazer said. "No one knows where the northern boundaries of this Grant are. I claim they don't come up this high, that they run along the base of the foothills."

Pop stared at him. "You're crazy. Ketchel will fight you every inch of the way."

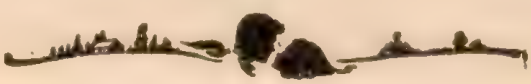
"I expect him to, but in the meanwhile we're in possession. We'll put on every Mexican who comes up here looking for work. We'll run the mill twenty-four hours a day.

Pop stared at him.

"And we've got the men to fight," Frazer added. "Why do you think I've been hiring these gunfighters? If Ketchel wants a battle he'll find one, right here."

"Let them come," Pop muttered. "We'll try and be ready for them."

(To be continued in the next issue)



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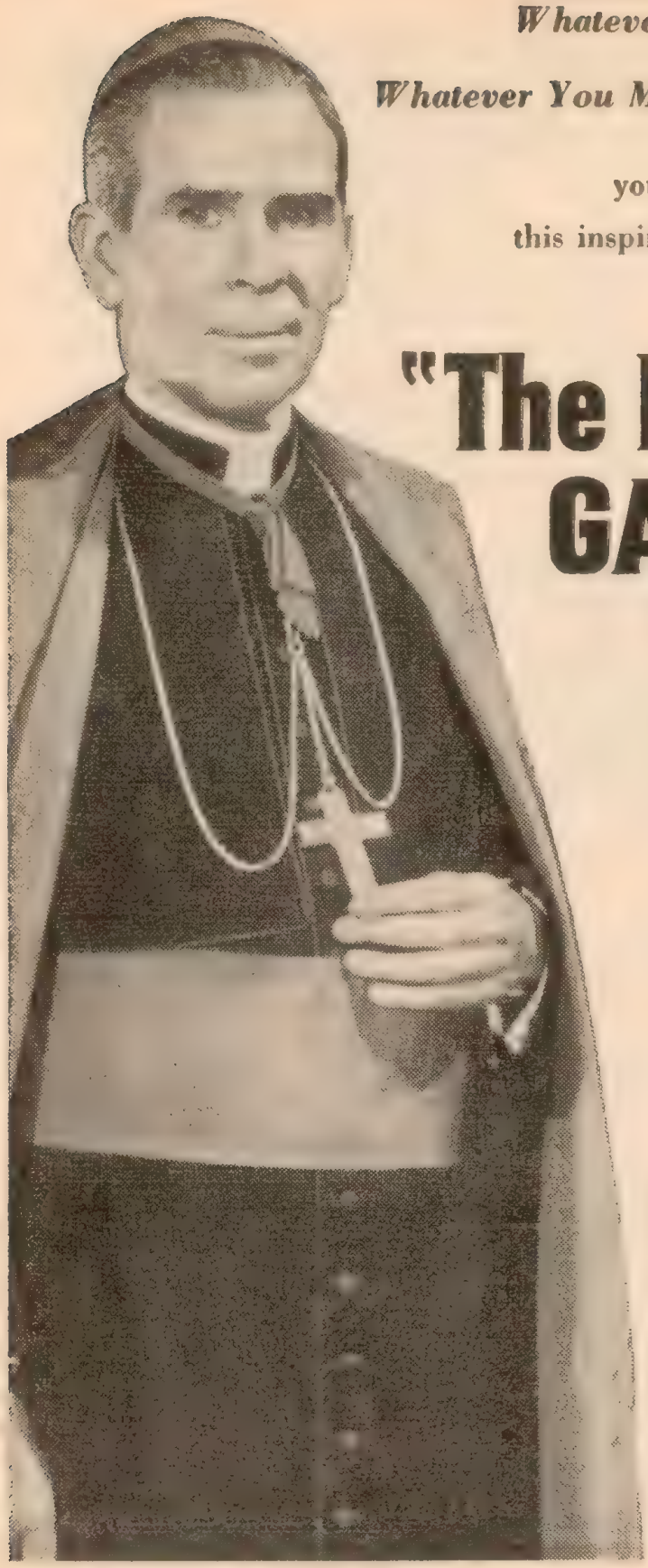

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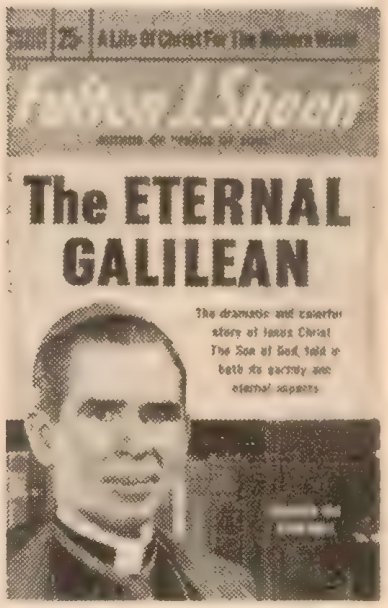

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Without warning, she kissed him

Free-Wheeling Foreman

By Cy Kees

NONE of the crew knew what to think of it when Boss Bode Bailey made Cal Spinner head foreman of his sprawling cattle ranch. Why the hard-bitten ranch owner had done it was a complete mystery. For that matter, Cal couldn't figure it out, either.

Scratching his head, Cal stood in the bunkhouse doorway, wondering how you rousted out a crew of waddies. He studied the five snoring figures. In the crisp dawn air, pulled out of a warm, pleasant sleep, their tempers would be mighty short, he thought.

In the far corner, Johnny White dozed peacefully, his corn-colored hair touseled over his eyes. The gangly Slim snored like a rusty saw, his lantern jaws rising and

CAL SPINNER wanted Barbara, and he didn't want trouble—but one led to the other . . .

falling. Two other punchers had their heads buried in the blankets. And Spade Dalvis looked mean, even in his sleep.

Cal stared at him for a long time, wondering if Dalvis was really sleeping. His eyelids were closed over his baleful green eyes now, but he seemed just like a snake in the bunk—watchful, ready to strike out at the first sign of being crossed.

Again Cal wondered how he should go about waking them up. He squared his chin. When in doubt, he thought, be firm.

"All right, you snoozing beauties!" he yelled as loud as he could. "Wheel outa those bunks!"

They came alive fast, blinking at the light and reaching almost automatically for levis and boots. That is, all except Spade Dalvis.

Dalvis grunted, rubbed his broad hairy chest and relaxed back in the bunk. Cal hesitated, not wanting to put his own lanky strength against Dalvis's brute power. But if he was going to be foreman, he thought, he had to be firm. Squaring his chin, he stepped forward.

"That means you, too, Dalvis," he snapped. "Wheel outa there!"

"G'wan to hell, Spinner." Dalvis curled the blankets around his ears and went back to sleep.

Hot flaming anger surged through him, but again Cal hesitated. It had been his fiery temper that had first got him into this foreman's mess, and now he was more cautious. But it was showdown and he couldn't back out.

Gritting his teeth, Cal lunged in, head lowered. Without stopping to think of the consequences, he grabbed Dalvis's single narrow bunk and upended it.

A solid thump shook the bunkhouse, and the pile of blankets came alive with threshing arms and legs. Snarling low-throated curses, Dalvis untangled himself from the mess and came up swinging.

BRACING himself, Cal shot out his two fists as fast as he could pump them. They spattered over Dalvis's face and chest, and Cal felt meat give beneath his knuckles.

"Why you dirty—" Dalvis's voice broke off in a low growl, and he grabbed a nearby chair. Spitting blood, he swung it in a short vicious arc.

Bright blinding lights flashed in front of his eyes, and Cal felt his knees buckle. Something hot poured down his split cheek. His head exploded with pain, but he braced himself to fight back. Dropping the chair, Dalvis slammed a roundhouse right.

The fist smacked Cal solidly in the mouth, and he was hurled backwards, right through the bunkhouse door. In his whirling vision, Cal saw Boss Bode Bailey striding grimly through the kitchen door, a shotgun crooked in one arm. Cal winced.

"Foreman for fifteen minutes. You did damned good, Spinner," he mumbled before he lost consciousness.

His vision soon cleared and he found himself on a couch. A warm soft rag glided gently over his face. Pawing it aside, Cal looked up into the face of an angel.

No, not an angel, either, he thought grimacing. It was only Barbara Bailey, the boss's daughter. Then he corrected himself again. She *was* an angel, and for that reason he'd taken this cursed foreman's job. The rag found a raw cut, and Cal groaned.

"Hey, let me die of the germs, will you?" he pleaded and struggled to rise—against a pair of nicely tanned, slender arms.

"No, Dad said to patch you up," Barbara murmured in her soft, husky voice. As long as she didn't cover his eyes so he couldn't keep looking at her, Cal figured he wouldn't argue with her. He lay back.

Gazing at her, Cal decided he could never see too much of her glowing brown eyes, her smooth skin, and the dark hair that crowned her pretty face. And it was darned pleasant to have her putter around his face, even if it was butchered. Barbara glared.

"Must you always fight?" she demanded, taking kind of a rough swipe at a raw cut.

"I hate fighting," Cal said earnestly, and he did.

But ever since he'd drifted into Twobow, trouble was all he had found. That is, besides a forman's job he didn't want and

the nicest girl in the world whom he did want—tremendously. Trouble had started as soon as he had hitched his crowbait to the crowded hitch-rail the night before.

Angling toward the nearest saloon for a dust settler, he'd spotted them on the darkened street. Three rough-looking punchers surrounding and heckling the girl.

Even in the gloomy light, she looked startlingly sweet, and Cal changed direction fast. Pounding up the plank walk toward them, he heard her pleading, begging them to let her alone.

They weren't hurting her, but they had her worried. Out of the corner of his eye, Cal spotted another person—help—cutting toward them fast. But he didn't wait for company. He waded right in, swinging from the heels.

The first one he hit, a waspish puncher, pinwheeled through the nearest plate glass window. The second, a fiery redhead, doubled over, gagging with pain. The last, a burly tough, had been a rougher proposition.

With this one closing in, gouging and kicking, Cal had his hands full until the help joined in, slugging with a gun butt. The burly tough collapsed, his arms curled protectively around his head.

Puffing, Cal turned to his rescuer. Ugly, cursing snarls greeted his first words of thanks, and Cal stared. It was his first meeting with Spade Dalvis, and he couldn't figure out why Dalvis would help him and then, a minute later, turn on him like a rabied dog.

"You crazy, dimwitted tramp!" Dalvis raged, his square face mottling with fury. Then suddenly, he choked off and didn't say any more.

But Cal was too curious to let it go without an explanation. He frowned. "I thought the gal needed help," he said. "Didn't she?"

Dalvis glared. "Course she did, you dimwit. But I—I was coming and I could've cooled those hellions so they'd really learned a lesson."

Shrugging, Cal glanced at the two prone figures, at the hole in the window where the waspish puncher had disappeared.

"Well, they ain't going to be exactly spry for breakfast," Cal said. He grinned, a flat grin. "Tell you what, Mouthy, next time there's trouble, I'll write you a personal letter and you can come settle it."

"Mouthy, eh." Dalvis snarled, and he closed in.

"Wait!"

For the first time, Barbara Bailey entered into it. She put a slim hand on Dalvis's hairy arm, and it stopped him. "You hush now, Spade," she said, her voice firm, even though she was still pale and trembling. "I'm terribly grateful to this cowboy here and I can't see a single reason why you should be mad."

Curling his lips in a sneer, Dalvis whirled and walked off. Barbara Bailey followed him a few steps, then came back, shrugging.

"Now he won't talk to me for three days," she said listlessly.

"Is that the prize or a penalty?" Cal asked. "You married to him?"

Barbara's color deepened in the uncertain light. "Oh, no, I'm single."

"I thought you looked like you had better sense than to hook up with something like that," Cal said. He made it sound light, but abruptly, he was glad she wasn't married.

BECAUSE it came to him very suddenly that Barbara Bailey fitted the description of the girl he'd searched for since he was about twenty. Almost ten years now. Smiling to put her at ease, Cal introduced himself.

Half an hour later, he was riding with her to her father's ranch. Still waiting was the biggest surprise of the night.

At first, Bode Bailey was surprised at Barbara's account of the evening. "Nothing like that's ever happened in Twobow before," he growled, scratching his graying hair in puzzlement. "Dammit, if I've got anything to say about it, it never will again, either. You say Spade Dalvis was there?"

"Yeah, in all his greasy glory," Cal muttered.

"You don't think much of him, eh?"

Bailey's black eyes were sharp, querying.

"If I thought any less, I'd be in the hole on him," Cal said bluntly.

"He did act awfully queer," Barbara put in. "Almost like he was mad that Cal showed up at all."

"Probably wanted to be the big show himself because he knows I'm angling around for a foreman since Jud left," Bode Bailey said. "He's been trying his damndest to knock everybody else down and put himself in a good light. I was going to give it to him. But now I won't if you'll take it, Spinner."

Cal blinked. "Me?"

"Yeah. What the hell's wrong with that?" Bailey demanded.

"Well, I can't boss myself, much less a whole crew," Cal said, grinning. He happened to glance at Barbara, and her dark eyes were pleading with him to take it. She didn't want Dalvis to have it, Cal thought. Bailey shifted in his chair.

"Tell you why I want you, Spinner," he said. "There's been steady rustling going on here for blamed near two years, and I want to put a stop to it. Jud quit as foreman because he couldn't find the answer. And I'm stumped as bad—"

"Why don't you pick one of your own crew?" Cal put in.

"Because I either can't trust them or they ain't of a fighting breed," Bailey said bluntly. "Only two I got that'd do at all are Spade Dalvis and Johnny White. Johnny's too much joker and Dalvis—" Bailey scratched his head. "Well, I just don't know about Dalvis."

Slowly, Cal shook his head. "I'd sure like to help you if I could, but I'm afraid not," he said. "I just ain't had the experience myself and—"

"Cal, please do," Barbara said quietly.

At the tone of her voice, his heart hammered, and he glanced at her. Barbara was looking away, the crown of her dark hair turned to him, and he couldn't see the expression on her face. But he could guess what it was from her voice.

It was more than a plea for help on the ranch. It was something more. A lot more. It said she was interested in him in a woman's way and that she wanted very much for him to stay.

Cal nodded. "I'm warning you, Bailey, you'll be sorry," he said earnestly. "But if you want me to give it a try, I'm willing."

So the deal was made. After meeting the crew, Cal headed for the foreman's shack. But before that, Barbara came close in the darkness, and without warning, kissed him briefly, with sweet, warm, exciting lips.

"That was for helping me," she said, and she turned quickly and darted through the darkness toward the main house.

"No it wasn't Barbara," Cal murmured, rubbing the back of his hand over his mouth. "That was for us because we finally got together." He scowled. "But damn, what a hell of a place to be found!"

Sleeping fitfully in the forman's hard bed, Cal dreamed ugly dreams of what it'd be like to be foreman on the Bailey ranch. Except that Barbara would be improving the scenery, he could find nothing even faintly attractive about it.

Rousing himself at dawn, Cal headed out into the crisp morning air and walked with bold steps toward the bunkhouse. With his first look at the rough, snoring crew, he knew he was going to have his hands full.

But he'd plunged right into the job of wheeling them out of their bunks. And ended up getting his face bathed by Barbara Bailey.

He glared up at her now.

"Yeah, I hate fighting," he said again. "But you got no right to cuss. You was the one got me into it."

Bracing himself, he sat up. His head hammered like he had seven devils with sledges inside, and it seemed to whirl crazily in thin air.

"Here, you lay back." Barbara's husky voice was full of concern, but Cal shook his head.

"Heard tell there's some rustlers around here," he said. "If they'd lay off while I got my head washed, I'd be willing. But they won't." He forced himself to his feet. "Reckon I'll have a look around this morning."

IGNORING her sharp protests, he weaved his way outside. The fresh air cleared his head, and he went to the corrals to pick a horse. Before he mounted, Bode Bailey rounded the horse barn.

"I should run Spade Dalvis off the ranch," Bailey rasped. "The crew said you had him whipped till he hauled up that chair."

"Well, they was wrong," Cal said, grinning. "He just didn't have his second wind yet. Let him stay, and by damn, I'll use a club of my own if he makes trouble again."

"You're foreman," Bailey said. "You got to know what men you can use." He pointed out over the range. "I sent the crew out to start my trail herd this way. We want to keep a close eye on them, because if I lose them, I'm cleaned."

Cal nodded. "Uh-huh. Did they ever make off with a whole herd?"

"Not yet, but they're getting more guts and gall all the time," Bailey rasped. "And somehow they seem to know just where we're going to be working, and they hit the places we ain't watching."

"M-m," Cal mumbled, rubbing the raw cuts thoughtfully. He let it go at that, but it set him thinking. It sounded like there was a spy around the ranch. If there was, Spade Dalvis would be the likeliest candidate. Cal shrugged.

Anyway he looked at it, he could see trouble and not too far away. He might as well wait till he ran into it before he began to worry, he thought, riding away. He wasn't extra fast with the .45 that rode his hip, but he'd use it anyway.

He owed that much to Barbara, Cal figured, for wanting him to stay.

After riding a couple hours, he hadn't found the herd, and Cal did start to worry. He wasn't the biggest greenhorn west of St. Louis, but he wasn't an Indian on the trail either, and he started wondering if he could find it at all.

If he couldn't, his time as foreman was over. Cal scowled. If a foreman couldn't find his crew when he had a whole herd pointing them out, he might as well quit. And especially in open, flat country like this.

There were more tracks, he noticed, but no sign of the herd. Then far across the range, he saw the crew coming. Four of them, all afoot. Cursing under his breath, Cal spurred his horse and hurried toward them. A few minutes later, he confronted them, his whole crew, except Spade Dalvis.

Coming closer, he spotted their empty holsters and had the first hint of what might have happened. They looked downhearted, beaten. Cal pounded up to them and reined in.

With faint, sheepish grins, they looked at each other, each waiting for one to explain. Johnny White's corn-colored hair was matted with dark red dried blood, and he no longer seemed to be in a joking mood. None of them said anything, and Cal glared.

"Well, what the hell's the matter?" he barked. "You resting your horses or did they get too tough for you to ride?"

The lantern-jawed Slim stepped up, flushed brick-red. "You shoulda let that darned Dalvis sleep," he drawled. "He caught us one by one, dehorned us and put us afoot."

"And then tucked the herd in his hind pocket and rode off, I suppose," Cal growled.

"Well, he did get the herd but he had help," Slim said. He shook his head mournfully. "When the four of them got together, we didn't have a chance."

"Four, eh?" Dark ugly suspicion slivered through him, and Cal frowned thoughtfully. "What did the other three look like?"

"Let's see, one was a shriveled up little jigger," Slim said. "Another was a redhead, and the other'n looked like a third cousin to a grizzly bear."

Cal nodded eagerly. "This shriveled up one—did he look like he might've stuck his head in a meat grinder?"

"Yeah, he sure did," one of the other waddies put in. "Had a dirty bandage around his head, and his face was all scratched up. You know him?"

"Met him the other night," Cal said. He was sure now that it was the waspish puncher of the three he'd rowed with in town. "He took a fast header through a

window," he added by way of explanation.

"Enough of this palaver," Johnny White snarled, scowling at them. "Ride back to the ranch, Spinner, and get us fresh mounts and guns. Let's go after those thieving sons!"

The rest of them perked up and nodded agreement. It was tempting, Cal thought. With the crew at his back, along with Bode Bailey, they would have a force to whip the four rustlers.

But cold reason told him that would take too long. By the time they were organized, it would be too late to save the herd. And Bailey had said he had to save it or go broke. Slowly, Cal shook his head.

"By the time we got close to them, they'd be clean into Old Mexico with that herd," he said. "I'd better follow them while—"

"Ah, don't be a damn fool," Slim said in disgust. "You'll lose the whole works, going after them alone. Hurry up and get back to the ranch."

"You go to hell," Cal said pleasantly and grinned. "I'm still foreman of this ranch and what I say goes." Hearing their bitter cursing, he spurred his horse and headed on the trail of the four rustlers.

WHEN he reached the bedding grounds where the herd had been held, he found the trail leading south. It was easy to follow, and it gave him time to think. While he rode, the pieces of the range puzzle fell cleanly into place.

Trying to curry favor with Bode Bailey, Dalvis had figured out a simple scheme. He'd sent his rustler pals into town to wait their chance when Barbara Bailey was alone. Pestering her, they had set the scene for Dalvis to play the big hero by busting in and saving her. Cal grinned wryly.

In his stumbling way, he'd blundered into the thing and robbed Dalvis of the glory and had given the three a sound thrashing that hadn't been figured in the day's wages.

Thinking back now, Cal remembered that Spade Dalvis hadn't really hit the big puncher at all. With his arms curled protectively around his head, the big rustler had kept the gun butt from landing.

"No wonder Dalvis was so mad he didn't know enough to keep his big yap shut," Cal muttered.

With a half dozen punches, he'd ruined Dalvis's scheme for getting into a position to do Bailey real hurt. As foreman, Dalvis could have planned the rustling operations so Bailey might never have got wise, or until it was too late to save himself from complete ruin.

But having been balked in that, Dalvis was doing something just as bad—taking the whole herd. Thinking of the four with the herd, Cal winced.

"That'll be a sweet bunch for me to face," he muttered mournfully. "Every one with a sore head and a grudge half as big as a house. I'd have a war on my hands even if I wasn't going to try and take the herd away from them."

Still, when he thought of the dark, slender Barbara, he knew he wouldn't swap places with any man in the world. The risk was high, but so were the stakes. In his case, a chance for a permanent job on Bailey's ranch, and the chance to win Barbara. The job didn't appeal to him, Cal thought, grinning, but Barbara did.

While he rode, he checked his Colt .45 and shoved a live shell in place of the empty he always carried under the hammer. When he caught up with them, he'd probably need those six bullets and a lot more. Then, far ahead, over the rolling range, he saw a big cloud of dust.

It was the herd, and from the looks of the dust, it was moving at a fast pace. Dalvis and his three cronies weren't taking any chances of having pursuing Bailey hands catching up with them before they reached the Border. Smiling grimly, Cal closed in.

Before he spied the horseman riding drag, he was sure they had spotted him. They would be watching their backtrail close, and he was moving in the open, with no cover to shield him. But he didn't slow his pace.

There was no way out now. By the time the walking punchers aroused Bailey and made the return trip, the herd would be gone for sure if he waited for help. Off to the right of the billowing dust, Cal spotted an outcropping of loose shale rock.

There was cover there, the only cover in sight. But it would be useless to him, he thought. He had to chase the herd and he couldn't pack the rockpile along.

It looked like a running fight in the open, with the odds four to one against him. But there wasn't any choice. Closing in, Cal recognized the waspish puncher he'd pinwheeled through the store window.

"He'll be sorer than a picked boil," Cal muttered uneasily. And the other three wouldn't be in any sweeter temper. Chilling with icy fear, Cal watched the waspish puncher spur up to the rider pointing the herd.

His head jerked, and the two rode back together, pausing for a long look. Grimly, Cal rode straight at them, knowing this was showdown.

In a few seconds, the other two were alerted, and all four joined forces. Letting the herd run, they went into a close-knit conference.

Then over the thin afternoon air, Cal heard a high-pitched yell, and all four charged straight towards him. He reined in his horse hard.

He knew they had recognized him and were leaving the herd untended to get him. Made revengeful by the beating he'd given them, they weren't waiting for him to attack. They were going to run him down. For one long, tense moment, Cal froze, then he wheeled his horse.

As long as they were after him, he thought furiously, they wouldn't be getting the herd any farther south. Their fury at him was turning into an advantage. In their urge to down him, they were sacrificing sure safety. Cal gritted his teeth, leaning far over his saddle horn, trying to urge more speed out of his horse.

If he could only lead them back, Bode Bailey's crew would be coming. They'd hit head on, and the rustlers would be outnumbered. Glancing back, Cal groaned.

He could never make it. They seemed to surge ever closer, and his own horse was beginning to falter. Off to the left now, the rock outcropping beckoned to him, and Cal bore that way.

Reaching it, he flung himself off his horse as lead whined overhead. Scraping half the skin off his knees on the rough rock, he burrowed behind it, trying to shield his whole body with rock. The four rustlers kept up a hot fire.

NONE of the singing lead connected, but every time it came close, he got a shower of rock. When he peeked through a cleft in the rock, the men seemed startingly close. Poking his .45 through the slot, Cal squeezed off a shot.

The big burly rider seemed suddenly drunk. Settling in his saddle, his head lobbed from side to side, and his horse ran off, out of control. Then the horse pitched, and the big rider flopped on the ground and laid still.

Cursing harshly, Spade Dalvis waved his arms, and the other three retreated back out of the range of Cal's sixgun. They held a hurried conference, seemed undecided now.

"They got me cornered and now they're wondering what to do with me," Cal muttered fiercely. "They're thirsty for my blood, but they ain't hungry for the lead they'll have to eat to get it."

Knowing he had the bulge, Cal studied the ground carefully. Off to the right, about a half mile away, the herd had slowed to a stop. Apparently the rustlers had come to a decision for they rode back toward the herd.

It relieved and yet rankled Cal that they'd given in so easily. He scowled after them. If he could have kept them interested in the fight, he might have held them until Bailey got there with the crew. But looking back over the range, he could see no sign of them.

Reaching the herd, the three riders fired a volley of shots, starting the herd in a mad run. In wide-eyed amazement, Cal stared.

The herd was heading straight at him. He knew then what their idea was and he

cursed savagely. There was no safety in the shallow rock covering with a stampede running pellmell over it.

They were going to flush him out with the herd. When they shot him, they'd wheel the herd and head full tilt toward the Border again. And nothing this side of hell would stop them.

Puffing with the effort, Cal raced for his horse, now grazing peacefully a few hundred yards away. The herd was pounding closer, closer, and he mounted in a rush.

Cursing the horse's slowness, Cal urged it into a run, but he knew he wouldn't get far. In the open, they'd have him whipped. Then he saw Dalvis, far ahead of the other three, riding low, intent on getting to him first.

"All right, mister, you'll get your wish," Cal rasped, swallowing hard. Without thinking it over, he wheeled his horse and rode straight at Dalvis.

Leveling his .45, he held off shooting, got closer and closer to the charging rider. Dalvis' sixgun bucked in his hand, and lead whined overhead. But Cal never slackened his relentless charge.

Dalvis reined up, hesitating, and it was his big mistake. The lead steer caught his horse in full stride, staggering it off balance. Yelling, Dalvis tried to line his horse out again, but it was too late.

The full force of the herd hit him, and his horse went down.

Dalvis shielded his head in his arms, in a hopeless try to save himself. The herd thundered over him.

Seeing Dalvis go down, the other two riders rode together and fell back. Now that he had the upper hand, even with the odds still against him, Cal circled off to the left and drifted in behind the herd.

He kept them running, but the other two rustlers seemed to have got their bellies full of that herd. They didn't challenge Cal's power to take it. With nothing to stop him, Cal dogged the herd from behind, keeping the steers running full tilt toward the ranch.

Halfway there, he met the whole works coming on a dead run. Bode Bailey rode in the lead, Barbara was not far behind, and the rest of the crew followed. The crew split off to take charge of the herd, but Bode Bailey and Barbara pulled up.

Bailey's grizzled face was twisted in a dark scowl. "How in the blue blazes did you get that herd back?" he demanded.

"I'm foreman, ain't I?" Cal snapped, straight-faced. "I ordered Dalvis to get that herd the hell back where he found it, and he pitched right in to help."

"Where is Dalvis then?"

"He got a bellyache," Cal said. "He's laying back there."

"Oh." His brow furrowing still more, Bailey rode off toward the herd, shaking his head.

Grinning, Cal turned to Barbara. "Maybe I better tell you right away," he said. "That crew isn't all I'm planning to boss around here." He tried to sound tough, but his voice was gentle. "You're going to get a few orders, too."

Her dark eyes gleaming with warmth, Barbara nodded. "I'll be waiting for them," she said.

Fowl Play

By LIMERICK LUKE

An ardent young dude fom Kentucky
Tried calling a cowgal his "ducky."
She said: "Oh, what twaddle!
Do *you* think I waddle?"
He may win her back if he's lucky!

The Emperor

PROBABLY one of the most lovable yet odd characters of early-day San Francisco was Emperor Norton—Emperor Extraordinary of the United States and Protector of Mexico.

In reality the emperor was Joshua A. Norton, who was born in Scotland February 4, 1819, presumably of good parentage. Little is known of his early life except that he came to San Francisco from Rio de Janeiro in December of 1849. He had a good business head and invested the $40,000 he brought with him in real estate and in the brokerage business.

By his shrewd judgment and remarkable business acumen he raised his original investment, in a few years, to around a quarter of a million dollars.

a true story by Fred Harvey

In 1853 he formed a combine with other associates and firms to corner the rice market. He had made a considerable amount of money in this commodity, and since the situation looked promising, he invested most of his cash and holdings. As has often happened in the past to investors, the unexpected happened to Norton. Two unexpected cargoes of rice arrived in the city, the rice market dropped below cost, and the combine hit bottom—they could not control or buy up the new shipments. To protect themselves from complete ruin, the other firms sold out and Norton suffered the loss.

Court proceedings, litigations, and other legal difficulties followed. This unbalanced Norton's mind, and he retired into obscurity.

In 1859, all the papers in San Francisco received from him copies of the following statement, which they printed:

> At the preemptory request and desire of a large majority of the citizens of the United States, I Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and for the last nine years and ten months of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these United States, and direct the representatives of the different states of the Union to assemble in Musical Hall, of this city, on the last of February. Next, then and there to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is laboring, and thereby cause confidence to exist, both at home and abroad, in our stability.
>
> Signed:
> Norton I, Emperor of the United States.
> 17th September, 1859.

From the beginning the citizens of San Francisco humored the self-styled ruler, and furthered his obsession by telling him that Mexico also needed a protector. So he added the title "Protector of Mexico." This was later dropped when Maximilian arrived south of the border.

FOR more than twenty years Norton could be seen walking the streets of the city, politely greeting his loyal subjects. He was a heavy-set, picturesque figure of medium height, with broad forehead, clear eyes, brown hair, heavy eyebrows, mustache and beard. His loyal subjects kowtowed to his whims in every way. They furnished him with a beaver hat and navy blue coat, cut in military style and adorned with brass and gold epaulets—which were replaced whenever they became too tarnished.

The beaver hat was decorated with a feather and rosette and was replaced whenever necessary. Norton always carried an umbrella and a gold-mounted cane and was accompanied by two dogs, Bummer and Lazarus, which enjoyed with him the freedom of the city.

For an emperor he lived a simple life. His palace was a six-by-ten room with worn furniture and a threadbare carpet. He was interested in all civic affairs and attended church socials, school commencements, and other activities.

He was arrested only once in his life. A newly-appointed deputy took him before the Commissioner of Lunacy, but the next day Norton was released with apologies.

For years his room rent was paid by a lodge to which he belonged, and by voluntary subscriptions. He issued script with his likeness on it, and which was made payable in ten years at four per cent interest. So well known was he that he ate his meals at saloons and cafés without paying for them. Whenever he needed money, he wrote a small check or script which was honored by storekeepers and bankers.

For his loyal subjects he issued bonds of small denominations. When his uniforms wore out they were replaced in an elaborate public ceremony.

The emperor died January 8, 1880, while standing on the street. He was seen to fall, and he passed away within ten minutes.

The funeral was conducted by a Reverend Githens, who spoke kindly of the late emperor's kindness to children and to people in general. Expenses were paid by the Pacific Union Club and a Mr. Eastland. Ten thousand people attended.

He was interred in the Masonic cemetery. Another ceremony took place in the Woodlawn cemetery on July 30, 1934, the purpose being to perpetuate the name of the Emperor Norton.

His insanity has been questioned by many, but he really believed that he was Emperor of the United States.

EDNA COULD BE just as stubborn as
a mule . . . so when she chased Ned, he
figured there was no use running away

SHAWNEE-COUNTRY

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm in no position to do you any damage!"

SHOWDOWN

By CLARK GRAY

NED TOMPKINS decided to retire at the age of twenty-five. Not that he was wealthy—in fact he didn't have so much as a silver dollar in the pockets of his buckskin pants. But in those days you didn't need money to retire.

So, in the spring of 1854, Ned drifted down to the Nations with his old friend, Tall Jim, a Shawnee Indian. While Tall Jim joined his family there, Ned built his retirement shack on a nearby creek that fed into the Canadian River. He killed a couple of fat deer and made himself a new set of buckskins. He smoked some meat, trapped a few rabbits, caught a few fish, and set out a little garden with rows of onions and beans and tobacco. He traded a stack of pelts for such necessities as powder and lead. Then he lay on his back in the sun, sighed with contentment, and dropped off to sleep.

He slept for three weeks, off and on. Sometimes he woke up to eat a meal of jerky and squaw bread; sometimes he went to Shawnee stomps with Tall Jim; sometimes he leaned against a tree, smoked his pipe, and listened to the jaybirds talk. But mostly he slept, catching up for all the years gone by.

But at the end of three weeks he wasn't sleepy any more. He got up and scratched himself and hoed a few weeds out of his garden. Then, getting bored, he ambled down to the creek to take a bath. That's where the schoolma'rm caught him.

Now this schoolma'rm was a dainty little thing no bigger than thirty seconds. But she wasn't woods trained, and so she made plenty of noise as she came cutting through the buckrush. Ned heard her in time to grab a tree root and slither off to a deep spot in the creek. He was nothing but a head sticking out above water when she spotted him and let out a squeal that almost split his eardrums.

"Ma'am," Ned told her with dignity, "no call to screech that way. I'm in no position to do you any damage."

The schoolma'rm opened her mouth to squeal again, then gulped and stared at him. Ned noticed she was pert and blue eyed. She had yellow braids and a figure that reminded him of a mighty handsome fiddle. She said, "You're Ned Tompkins?"

"None else," Ned said. "If you'll just toss me my britches, ma'am—"

SHE cocked her head to study him, and now something tickled the corners of her mouth into a little grin. "The trapper?" she asked. "The man who stood off six Blackfeet for three days and nights? The man who was the champion handwrestler of the whole Rocky Mountains? The man that used to bring the beaver fur in by the packload?"

Ned squeezed a glob of creek mud between his toes and squinted at her uncomfortably. "That's me, Ma'am. But I'm retired now. You'll find those britches—"

"Listen, Ned Tompkins," the schoolma'rm said. "I'm Edna Ferguson, the schoolma'rm. I've come up here especially to see you."

"You aim to see me with britches," Ned asked wearily, "or without?"

"All right," she said, "if I throw you the trousers, will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Ma'am," Ned said, "I have no money, and I don't want a job." He paused, then added, "And I'm not looking to get married, either."

That fetched a pink flush to her cheekbones. She bit her lip. "All right. Will you listen to what I have to say? That's all I ask."

Ned felt a tiny creature slither past his ankles and begin to nibble his toes. It could have been a fish, a crawdad, or a turtle. He sighed. "Ma'am, I reckon I'm trapped."

Three minutes later Ned had climbed up the creek bank and joined her under a cottonwood tree. His buckskin pants rode comfortably on his hips now, and he felt as if he could face the world again. He stuffed his pipe with Indian tobacco and walked toward her, a slab-shouldered man with rippling muscle under the tight doeskin shirt. He said, "All right, Miss Edna. Bang away."

Oddly, now, she blushed. She settled back against the tree, looking pretty as a mountain sunset. "Mr. Tompkins," she said. "Ned . . . it's about Billy Doorman, the cattleman. Maybe you've heard of him."

Ned said, "Oh!" Then he took flint and steel from his pocket and struck a spark into his pipe. He made a slow job of it, because he had heard of Billy Doorman, and so he understood now what this girl wanted of him.

"Sorry," he said at last. "I'm not a law officer, ma'am."

Something in her eyes looked desperate. "Please," she said, "don't refuse till you've heard me out. It has to be a white man who faces up to Billy Doorman. The Indians are afraid of trouble."

Ned said, "No deal, Ma'am." He blew smoke over her head and made his face go stony. "This is not United States territory. It's part of the Nations, and no white man has any rights here. Not Billy Doorman, nor me, nor you."

She shook her head. "You're wrong. I have a right, because the Indians hired me to teach their children. You have a right, because you're Tall Jim's friend. But Billy Doorman has no right at all. He brings three thousand cows and a half-dozen white hardcases, and the Indians don't dare do anything about it for fear of the troops. You know what would happen if Billy Doorman or one of his cowboys were killed by an Indian. The troops would be here inside of a week. The Indians don't want that."

NED said, "I couldn't do anything for you."

She bit her lip, then straightened and looked at him with scorn. "The great Ned Tompkins—" she said, "—the terrible trapper—afraid of a blustering cowman."

"Listen," he said irritably. "How come you're so stirred up about Billy Doorman, anyhow? It isn't your worry."

She glared at him. "There is such a thing as helping your friends. Duty is the word, Ned Tompkins. Duty and honor."

He shrugged. "That's okay for you. Me, I'm done with duty. I'm retired. I've got a lot of fishing to catch up with."

Her face went a bright pink with anger, and for a moment Ned figured she was going to slap him. He wished she would, because he badly needed to dislike her. She was the kind that made Ned nervous with

her talk of duty, responsibility, jobs. She was the kind that believed a man's place was behind a plow, slaving to feed some brood of children. In short, she was a woman.

She said in disgust, "You *are* a miserable sort!"

Cheerfully Ned nodded. "Granted, ma'am. I just want to be let alone, bothering nobody. Naturally that makes me a dirty coyote."

She said, "Oh, you—you—I hate you." Abruptly her blue eyes filmed with tears and she turned and ran. Her ankles went twinkling through the timber, and she was gone. Ned felt an uncomfortable empty sensation in his stomach. It wasn't guilt exactly, but it sure wasn't caused by anything he'd eaten, either.

He sighed, and ambled back to his cabin. The sun shone brilliantly on the waving bluestem grass of the little clearing, and overhead a few puffs of ice-cream-like clouds drifted through the blue sky. He lay on his back and chewed a blade of grass, trying to be happy.

But it wasn't the same as before. He kept thinking of Edna Ferguson. She was a rare one, he admitted. It took lots of spunk for a white girl to come way out here to the Nations to teach a bunch of heathen Shawnees. And she was the prettiest trick he had seen since his last rendezvous in Taos.

He grunted and smiled, thinking of her yellow braids, and a voice said, "Toothache, maybe?"

He opened his eyes. He saw a couple of bare brown feet and a pair of ragged cotton pants. He said, "Hello, Tall Jim."

Tall Jim said, "You hurt someplace? You grunt."

Ned shook his head. "Woman," he said.

Tall Jim said, "Umph!" and crossed his legs and sat down. The old Indian wore no shirt. His skin was the color and texture of a battered penny. His clothing consisted only of the cotton pants, and a straw hat with a feather in it. He and Ned had trapped half the Rocky Mountains together. They had gotten drunk together and fought keelboat crews together in the dives of St. Louis, and saved each other's lives from skulking Blackfeet in the beaver country. They were friends.

Ned said, "Stomp dance tonight?"

Tall Jim pulled a twist of homegrown tobacco from his cotton trousers. "No stomp. Not tonight. Maybe never."

Ned shot a sharp glance at Tall Jim's black eyes as he took the twist of tobacco the old man offered. An unpleasant suspicion came to life in his mind, but he said nothing. He only bit off a chew and returned the twist to the brown hand.

"Shawnee no dance," Tall Jim went on, "long as white man's cows on Shawnee grass. You know this white man, my friend? His name Billy Doorman."

THERE were certain obligations, Ned Tompkins decided, that even a retired man had to face. There was friendship, for instance. Refusing help to Edna Ferguson was one thing, but turning down Tall Jim was another. That was why, a half hour later, he left the creek and climbed alone through timber that changed from sycamore, cottonwood and elm, to redoak and blackjack and hickory.

At noon he reached a limestone outcrop that thrust a rocky spine high above the rest of the Shawnee country. Here he could see for miles. He lit his pipe, sat in the shade of a scraggly whiteoak, and searched the land for Billy Doorman's cattle. He had promised Tall Jim he would speak to the man, no more—and that was all he intended to do.

As his glance moved swiftly over the miles, he felt again the old deep joy of the outdoors spill through him. Winding creeks sparkled in the sunlight. Bands of dark green timber lay here and there against the lighter green of rolling grassland. A hawk cut lazy circles out of the bright hot sky, and he saw the cattle at last as a great patch of moving brown ants, gnawing at a hillside.

Anger stirred in Ned at the way Billy Doorman's cattle were laying the country naked. There were too many animals too tightly herded, and the result would be dust and soil erosion and eventual exhaustion of the land. The Doorman tents—white squares of canvas that stuck out like ugly

thumbs—were pitched a scant quarter mile from the schoolhouse, he saw.

For a while he just sat there, smoking his pipe and comparing two civilizations. The white men like Billy Doorman were the destroyers, the greedy, who scarred the land and made it ugly. By contrast, the Shawnees had scarcely changed the looks of the country at all. Here and there Ned could see a brown roof nestled among trees, or a plowed field with its split rail fence, but there was nothing harsh in the way the Indians lived. The Shawnee were as civilized as many white folks, Ned knew—with their log cabins, their farms, their wives who wove and spun and kept house like any white woman—yet the Indian way of civilization was somehow a part of nature, instead of a separate ugliness.

The sun was stretching long shadows when Ned left the hills and crossed the last plowed field toward the white men's tents. He walked through ankle-high young cotton plants and strolled past the log schoolhouse. Edna Ferguson was drawing water from a clanking well in the back yard of the teacher's house. She gave him a startled glance and a quick smile. But Ned ignored her, stalked on down a sandy trail, and reached the tents just as the sun was a red ball on the crown of the hills.

The tents were square blocks of canvas with sharp angles, set in trodden earth. A half-dozen horses grazed in a rope corral a few rods away, and three men sat before a fire, eating out of frying pans. They looked up at Ned's approach—three bearded men wearing sweat-streaked hats, low-heeled boots, and guns.

Ned asked, "Billy Doorman?"

ONE of the three set down his frying pan and stood up, chewing leisurely. His beard was dusty yellow and his eyes were blue, and there was something cold and unsmiling in his quietness.

"That's me, friend."

Ned said, "The Shawnees sent me. They want you to know you're welcome to pass through their country."

Billy Doorman smiled. "Now that's real hospitable."

"You can leave in any direction," Ned said. "There's a good market for beef in Fort Smith."

"Thanks," Billy Doorman said. "I'll remember that, come fall."

Ned nodded, as if this was what he had expected. In a way it was. He had tried the nice way; now it was time for the rest.

"Mister," Ned said gently, "you don't understand. The Shawnees said you could pass *through* their country. That don't mean a license to linger."

Billy Doorman stepped forward and stuck his nose in Ned's face. He hadn't had a bath lately; he smelled of horses and sour sweat. "You figure to move me on, friend?"

Ned said, "Your cattle are eating up all the pasture. Your men aren't popular with the Indians. And besides all that, you're a bad example. If other cattlemen see you stealing grass they're likely to try it, too."

"That's tough," Billy Doorman sneered.

"All right," Ned said, "You want me to tell these Indians you won't move? You think you can hang on to your scalp after that, do you?"

Billy Doorman threw back his head and guffawed. "Those louse-ridden monkeys. They ain't took scalps for fifty years, and you know it. Besides, they wouldn't dare lay a finger on us. They'd have United States troops in here in ten days. Which is worse, friend, a few cows or a company of troops?"

That was where the cinch rubbed, Ned admitted to himself. The civilized tribes were supposed to be self-governing nations, with their own laws and their own Indian police. They even made treaties with the United States, but in reality the whole business was a silly farce. At the slightest disturbance United States troops occupied the Indian Nations. It was this disgrace to tribal pride that Tall Jim was trying to avoid.

Now Ned took out his pipe and stuffed it, with fingers that shook a little. A deep quiet rage bubbled in his chest, but he looked at Billy Doorman and smiled.

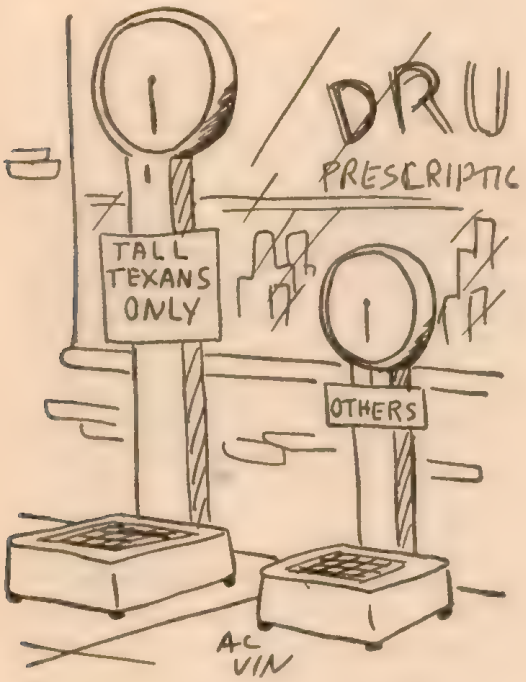
"There wouldn't be troops in if two white men got in a scrap, would there?"

Billy Doorman said softly, "I reckon not You want to try it that way?"

"I might," Ned said. "I'll think about it."

HE TURNED on his heel and walked off then, because this was as far as he dared bluff. The next move would be with guns, and a retired gentleman of leisure wasn't supposed to play with deadly weapons. He strode rapidly down the sandy trail toward the setting sun. Halfway to the schoolhouse, a figure stepped suddenly from behind a tree. It was the schoolma'rm.

"Well," she asked, "what happened?"



Ned stopped walking, and sweat broke out on the back of his neck. Behind him, he was aware that Billy Dorman still stood in plain view before the tents, watching him. He said, "Nothing much. Come on. Let's get out of here."

But she didn't move. She stood there, looking as pretty as a picture and as stubborn as a lady mule. She said, "Did you run him off?"

"Not exactly," Ned admitted. "Miss Edna, if you'll just stroll along beside me—"

"Why didn't you *force* him?" she snapped. "You're able, aren't you?"

"That isn't the question," Ned said lamely. "I'm retired, like I told you. I don't aim to tackle any risky chores for a while. I want to enjoy my old age."

She said, "Oh, piffle!" Then she stepped forward and put her arms around him.

Ned was too startled to move; he simply stood there frozen. His heart gave a great wham and pumped alarmed blood to his face. She snuggled against him, soft as a deer calf, and the feel of her lips on his was like the fleeting touch of a butterfly. She was smiling, and there was a glint of the devil in her blue eyes. Ned heard the angry whoop from the direction of the tents, and then he understood.

"Ma'am," he said. "You aim to get me shot right here, or do you figure Billy Doorman'll wait a while?"

She stepped back, smiling. Booted heels pounded the evening, and a hand clapped down on Ned's shoulder, spinning the sky in a half circle. He glimpsed Billy Doorman's yellow beard split in a snarl and he heard the man roar, "Leave her be. She's mine." Then the fist hit him.

Ned felt a twist of grass go thrusting past his ear, as his shoulders slammed the earth. He rolled and saw Billy Doorman's boot sail square toward his eye. He swung up on an elbow, catching the boot toe on his arm. Pain lashed him to the bone. He got his feet under him and came erect, butting Billy Doorman in the stomach.

Billy Doorman grunted and went stumbling backward, and then Ned had him. He butted Doorman again, driving his head deep into Doorman's belly, while digging forward with his legs. Doorman went over, and then Ned was on him. Ned rammed his elbow into the man's throat and pushed, and with his other hand he scratched for Doorman's gun. He got it, swung it, and slapped Doorman in the temple with it. Doorman relaxed and went quietly to sleep.

Ned stood up. He was breathing heavily. A faint red haze of anger curtained his vision. He turned to Edna Ferguson. "You did that on purpose, girl!"

She stood there with her blue eyes wide

and her cheeks pale. She said, "I didn't know he'd be so—so rough!"

"You wanted to rouse my dander," Ned said. "So I'd run him and his cows out of the country? That's it, eh?"

She flushed, "Was that so terrible?"

"I don't know," Ned said, and seeing her defiance he felt a little better. He scratched his head and began to think of revenge. His mouth twitched in a still-born grin. "But that isn't the worst of it," he said. "Doorman told me to leave you be, remember. Dang it, that means I've got to kiss you once more; just to show Doorman who's boss. No man tells me what to do."

SHE stared at him, and the deep flush crept clear to her ears. "No," she said, "Please, I don't want—"

"I don't want to do it, neither," Ned said solemnly. "I'm retired, and I aim to stay that way. I'm not interested in women and marrying and jobs of work. But I guess I have to do it just once, anyhow. I got my pride, you know."

And he reached out and caught her arm and pulled her to him.

She fought back at first, but he just held her close and let her beat at him. He just pushed his mouth flat against her own, and presently she quit fighting and sort of sighed and let her arms fall to her sides. When he released her, she was pale as chalk.

Contentedly Ned grinned at her.

"Evening, ma'am," he said. "Give your boy friend my compliments when he wakes up."

As he strolled home in the dusk, Ned felt pleased with himself. He had done his duty by Tall Jim and the Shawnees, he had whipped a bully, and he had kissed a pretty girl. A pleasurable day for a man who'd retired from the active life, he decided. He lit his pipe and smiled, and began to think of supper.

But when he reached his cabin he found more trouble. Tall Jim was waiting there with a worried frown.

"Billy Doorman no leave," Tall Jim announced. "How come?"

Ned took his time explaining. He knew he and his Indian friend were going to have their first real argument in years, so he fried a venison steak and trimmed onions from his garden while he talked. "I did what I promised, Tall Jim. I asked him to leave. But he said no."

Tall Jim chewed his homegrown tobacco and spit out the door. "You quit now, eh?" Tall Jim looked as disgusted as an Indian ever looks.

Jim said, "No, I don't quit, damn it! I just finished! I did what I started out to do. I promised to talk to Doorman—no more."

Tall Jim was a slender copper shadow sulking in the dusk. He stood there chomping and spitting, and Ned felt the accusation in his old friend's manner. Irritably he finished the steak, sliced it in two pieces with his hunting knife, and set out two wooden plates on his wooden table. "Dad rot it," he complained, "I'm not a gunfighter, Tall Jim. You never asked me to run him off the territory, anyhow."

"All right," Tall Jim said soberly, "I ask you now. Do this for Indian, Ned. Be Indian's friend."

Ned said, "No, blast it all! I'm your friend, but I'm not fool enough to buck Doorman and all those guns. I don't want to die before I get some fun out of being retired."

IT WAS full dark when they finished the steak and the onions. The argument was still running full blast, when something happened to end it. Ned stepped outside to draw a bucket of water from the creek and heard the thrum of cattle coming.

He stood listening a moment, then ducked back and said quietly, "Come." He caught Tall Jim's arm and drew him to the door. And now suddenly his heart was a slow steady slugging in his chest. Now it was like the old days, he thought, as he stepped toward the creek with Tall Jim in his tracks—the old days when death and the Blackfeet skulked behind the boulders. He held up his hand and said, "Listen," and once again he heard the drumming roar.

It was the noise of a half a thousand

hoofs, pounding earth. And it was coming closer. . . .

The stampede wasn't a large one, as stampedes go. It numbered somewhere between a hundred and a hundred fifty three-year-old steers, Ned estimated. He crouched in the timber of the creek and watched the animals smash through his garden and jam up against the sides of his shack. Horns clacked; dust lifted in a choking cloud; the bawling of the frightened animals pierced the ears like a woman's screams. Ned felt his fingernails cutting into his palms, as something gave way, groaning, in his shack. And then the four walls turned askew against the stars and collapsed.

A moment later it was over, the steers drumming on toward the river. There was a savage ringing in Ned's ears. It was his own blood, driving in sick rage through his veins. He heard Tall Jim's heavy breathing at his side. From somewhere in the vicinity of his wrecked shack, a laugh rose.

"Had enough, Tompkins?" The voice of Billy Doorman drifted through the dust cloud. "This is what happens to those who mess up my business arrangements—or my women."

Ned didn't answer for a moment. He was too choked up. He felt Tall Jim's hand on his shoulder, and he heard Tall Jim's soft grunt in his ear. "What you say now, friend?"

"Tall Jim," Ned breathed, "you just stand back and gather up the teeth."

Ned went away from that creek bank like a scalded bobcat. He stomped into the dusty ruins of his shack, and saw his garden mashed and trampled into a green pulp. In the middle of the mess sat a man on a horse. A little piece of moon outlined the man, glittering off his yellow beard.

Ned bawled, "Doorman, climb down and show me the color of your liver. I think it's yellow."

Doorman didn't climb down. Instead he yanked the reins and spun the horse on its hind feet, and Ned saw the pistol flash just in time. He plunged forward just as the explosion came. The wind of the bullet flipped his hair, and then he was leaping for the horse's nose.

Almost too late, he caught the bridle. His fingers closed on leather, just as the horse began to rear. He felt himself lifted, and the horse's front feet pawed dangerously close to his knees. Far below, Billy Doorman went slipping out of saddle, sliding over the horse's rump.

At the very peak of the horse's rearing action, Ned flung himself away from the bridle, whirled through space, and lit squarely atop Billy Doorman. The breath whistled out of the big man's lungs; the horse's hind feet straddled the blonde head a second, before the animal went lunging off into the night.

Then Ned used his fists. He sat across Billy Doorman and let the viciousness, the ugliness, flow out of him through his knuck-

RANCH FLICKER TALK

In The Next Issue

A Roundup of Western Movies by ROBERT CUMMINGS

Featuring a Review of Columbia's

THE BLACK DAKOTAS

Starring GARY MERRILL and WANDA HENDRIX

PLUS a word-and-picture personality sketch of

ROBERT STACK

les. He kept cutting and pounding, till Billy Doorman's nose broke, the blue eyes swelled shut, and the bearded lips were a bloody mess. At last Ned looked up, to see Tall Jim standing there, solemn and bronze in the moonlight.

Tall Jim didn't speak. He stooped to pick up something, then held out his hand. In the coppery opened palm glistened one of Billy Doorman's teeth.

BILLY DOORMAN left the Shawnee country next day. He didn't go in a box, which was Tall Jim's wish, but then he didn't go astride a saddle, either. He left in a buggy, bandaged and cursing and splitting blood, tended by one of his cowhands.

The rest of the cowhands gathered the scattered steers and began to move the whole herd on the trail toward Fort Smith. Ned saw to that. When the last bleating baby calf had disappeared into the distance, he went limping wearily toward the schoolhouse.

Edna Ferguson gave him a glass of lemonade, cooled in the spring. She found a bruise on his cheek and another on his forearm—relics of the fight that Ned hadn't even noticed—and bathed them in mustard liniment. Ned found it very pleasant.

"What'll you do now?" she asked. "You'll have no place to live, since that stampede wrecked your shack."

Ned grunted. "I haven't given it any thought," he said, and put his arm around her waist. She didn't seem to mind. Ned said, "Look here, ma'am."

She looked at him, and Ned kissed her, long and hard, and it was even more pleasant than the liniment on his bruises. When it was over, she giggled.

"You won't need to do that any more, Ned Tompkins. Billy Doorman isn't any place around to banter you."

Ned said, "Where'd he ever get the idea you were his woman, anyhow?"

That devil of amusement glinted in her eyes. "I let him think that. I had to get you two to fighting somehow."

Ned said, "Women!" and shrugged and kissed her again. She seemed to enjoy it, from the way she cooperated. But after a long time she pushed away.

"I thought you weren't interested in women. I thought you wanted to stay retired and single."

"I did," Ned said, "But that was before my shack got torn down. Like you say, I have no place to live now, unless I move in with the schoolma'rm."

She blushed to her ears, and it was very pretty. She said, "That calls for a marriage license and a preacher."

"I reckon it does," Ned said regretfully, "and I reckon that means I'll have to stop being retired and go to work. But I guess I can stand it. To tell the truth, it wasn't too much fun anyhow. Mostly I just slept."

Edna said, "This is a mighty strange way to propose, Ned Tompkins—if that's what you're doing."

Ned said, "It is, doggone it!"

Edna said, "I accept, darling. And to think how we first met. In the creek."

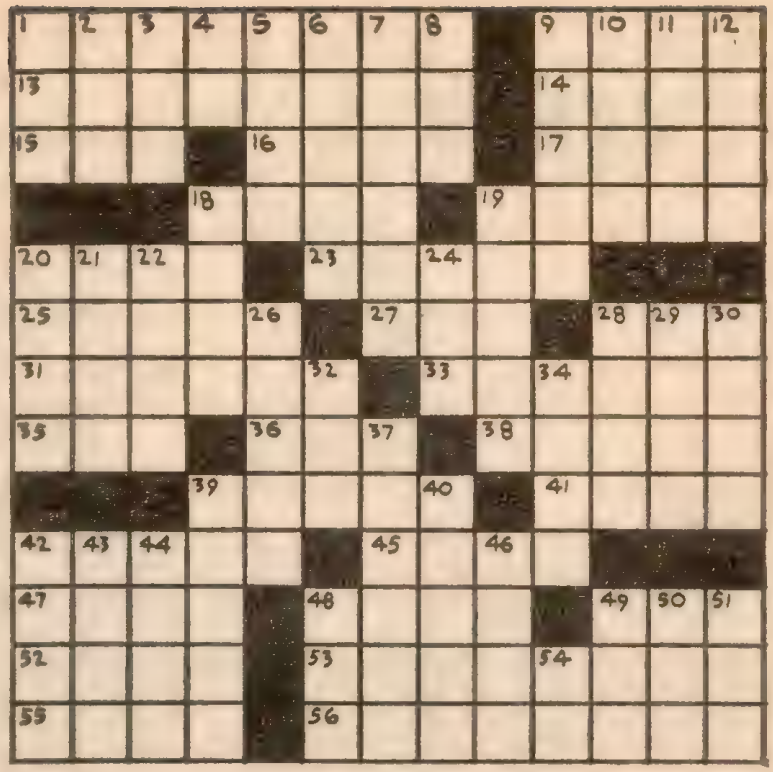
"Uh-huh," Ned said. "I never would have come out, except a turtle nibbled on my toes."

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 48)

1. Dark red.
2. An orphan lamb.
3. Ft. Laramie in Wyoming and Ft. Union in New Mexico.
4. New Mexico, mines near Carlsbad.
5. Frank C. Robertson, of Springville, Utah.
6. Trail bosses.
7. Tell the truth.
8. Jerky.
9. Grass.
10. Buck, also sometimes *carnero* (car-NAY-ro).

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Cowboy
9 Young cow
13 Insolent
14 Operatic solo
15 One or another
16 Standard amount
17 To change direction
18 State flower of Utah
19 To dodge
20 Highest point
23 Act of entering
25 Owner's mark on cattle
27 Knight's title
28 Not on
31 Capital of England
33 Horse's feed-bag
35 Female sheep
36 Six-shooter
38 Lariat
39 Evergreen trees
41 Killed
42 Western ----- knife
45 Foot covering
47 Prayer ending
48 Up above
49 Wages
52 To lease
53 Vicious horse
55 Within
56 Railroad bridges

T	O	M	■	C	L	A	P	■	A	T	O	M
A	P	E	■	R	E	N	O	■	S	O	D	A
M	E	S	Q	U	I	T	E	■	S	P	E	D
E	N	S	U	E	■	S	T	E	E	R	■	■
■	■	■	I	L	L	■	■	S	T	I	C	K
A	C	H	E	■	I	N	N	S	■	D	O	E
S	U	E	T	■	M	A	E	■	R	E	L	Y
E	R	R	■	S	A	G	E	■	A	R	T	S
A	L	E	R	T	■	■	D	E	N	■	■	■
■	■	F	O	Y	E	R	■	A	C	R	E	S
P	L	O	D	■	L	O	N	G	H	O	R	N
E	I	R	E	■	S	A	I	L	■	A	L	A
R	E	D	O	■	A	N	T	E	■	D	E	P

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 To bleat
2 Vase
3 To sob
4 Knockout (abbr.)
5 Chills and fever
6 Cattle land
7 Smelly vegetables
8 Baseballer Mel ---
9 Bunch of horses
10 Open surface
11 Fibbed
12 Transportation cost
18 To dispatch
19 Mistake
20 Competent
21 Black bird
22 Horse's neck hair
24 Man's nickname
26 Motherless calf
28 Verbal
29 Destiny
30 Defect
32 Convent dweller
34 To go upward
37 Western squatter
39 Calico horse
40 Glistened
42 Lynn ----, actress
43 Portent
44 Departed
46 Opens (poetic)
48 Skill
49 Buddy
50 Orange drink
51 Word of assent
54 Gross ton (abbr.)

THE CARD SHARK

The world seemed strange and wonderful, with Elizabeth here

JACK HAD NEVER MET a girl as sweet as Elizabeth . . . or a man as crooked as her father

IT WAS April. The geese honked low over the land in the late afternoon, breaking their V formation as they wheeled and banked before they circled warily to rest on lake or pond. When the sun came up they were on the wing, their sounds faint in the sky, and the cheerful little meadowlarks were sending their symphony from every corner of the earthy fields.

It was Sunday morning in Windy Butte when Jack Bannister saw her. He and his mother and father had driven to church in the democrat, and he was the first to climb out of the wagon. When his boots touched the sidewalk the dust lying thick on it clouded their shine, but the democrat wheels were mired in inches of mud. It was that way every spring, in Alberta.

He lifted his eyes from the paradox of it and caught the gay swing of a top-buggy's fringe. It was red, and so were the brave muddied wheels, while the coat of the high-stepping bay in the harness had been groomed to a shine.

She sat between the man and the lady in the buggy. She was roughly Jack's age, which was thirteen. How roughly he didn't care. He was content to stare in a strange new enchantment. It wasn't just that she was blue-eyed and had no freckles, not one, or that the delicate brows and hair were the deep tawny gold of September wheat. The way it was all put together, she had the sweetest face he'd ever seen.

The bonnet framing her face was pink. It was edged with blue velvet and tied under her chin in a blue velvet bow. Moreover, she was wearing a suit. He knew it was a suit, because the year Mrs. McPherson came out to live with the Colonel before he retired she'd been wearing a skirt and a little jacket of the same material, and his mother had said rather wistfully that it was a suit.

The buggy passed close by the democrat and his head turned with it. His father was busy wrapping the reins around the brake handle, but his mother said in a voice hushed and embarrassed so the people in the buggy wouldn't hear, "Jack! What are you staring at? Don't be so rude!"

By MARJORY E. BRADSHAW

SHE started to climb down, and he took his eyes away long enough to help her. When he looked again the buggy had stopped down the street. His father's Sunday boots thumped to the sidewalk behind him and Dave Bannister said, "That was a mighty fancy buggy that passed us. You see it, Abbie? City folks."

Abbie Bannister said, "I saw it. Jack did, too. He stared so hard I was ashamed for him."

"Oh, well." If anything was going to upset Dave Bannister it had to be something big. "Don't suppose they noticed. Or if they did, maybe they're used to it. Folks in Windy Butte don't get to see a buggy like that every day." He took his wife's arm. He was an elder of the church and couldn't abide latecomers, least of all himself or his own family. Already his stride was lengthening out.

Jack fell into step beside his mother. They were facing the buggy now, walking toward it. The three people stood beside it, looking for a place to cross the expanse of mud in the road, and Jack suddenly knew why they wanted to cross.

"They're going to church—our church!" he blurted, and a second later regretted it under the surprised and questioning look he'd drawn from his father. But it was true: the three mounted the worn wooden steps, shook a few hands at the door and disappeared inside.

"Well," Dave said slowly, "certainly there's no law against city folk going to church in the country."

Jack was glad they were going to be in church. Yet when he took off his hat at the door, his face was burning. The familiar raftered inside seemed hazy, and if his father hadn't been in front of him to guide him he would have turned aside a pew too soon.

He couldn't look far right or left to see where the people from the buggy were. It was only by cautious turns of his head when they were seated that he found them. By then the congregation was past the doxology and into the first hymn. He knew it by heart, which freed his eyes from the hymn book. He let them rest on the pink bonnet a few pews ahead and to the right, and sang as effortlessly as the minister himself.

> ***"On Christ the solid Rock I stand,***
> ***All other ground is sinking sand,***
> ***All other ground is sinking sand."***

When the service was over people shook hands with the man in the black beaver hat and the lady with the white boa. Jack's father and mother did too. He stood behind them, his heart pumping, conscious of his sturdy homespun pants and mackinaw that had been fashioned for wear and not beauty, yet finding it bearable because the girl in the pink bonnet wasn't looking at his clothes, but at him. There was a little smile on her face, and there was shyness in it.

His father's voice seemed to be coming from the bottom of a rainbarrel. "My name is Bannister. Glad to have you worship with us. Just passing through, are you?"

"Yes, on our way to Vancouver. I've been promising my family for years to take them to the coast by rail, and I'm finally going to do it." He held out his hand to Dave. "I'm John Gandy, and this is my wife Emma and my daughter Elizabeth."

Dave shook hands and introduced Abbie and Jack. "We run a few head of cattle a piece out of town here;" he told John Gandy. "Raise some feed—not much." His face crinkled genially. "I take it you're in a more lucrative business, Mr. Gandy."

JOHN GANDY laughed. He had a laugh Jack liked. In fact, Jack liked everything about John Gandy. He looked a person in the eye when he spoke to them, and while his hands were smooth and clean, not calloused and big-knuckled like his father's, he could tell he'd given his father as good a grip as he got.

He said, "In a way, Mr. Bannister, you might almost say we're in the same business. I deal in stocks and bonds at the Winnipeg Grain Exchange. Wheat, oats, barley, and the like. Also, I have a small interest in the breeding end of the racing business. I hope to begin a good line by my bay stallion."

Jack knew his father didn't think much of horse racing and that he wasn't going to let anyone think he did. He said soberly, "I didn't know horse racing was a business, Mr. Gandy."

Jack could tell Mr. Gandy thought his father was joking, because his laughter rang out unaffectedly. When he finished laughing there was a smile on Dave Bannister's face, an unwilling one, but still a smile. It made Jack feel good. He wanted his father to like Mr. Gandy.

He wanted to say something to Elizabeth with meaning and sense to it, but all he could think of was that he had a two-year-old gelding and that it was a mighty handsome horse if he did think so himself. Then it came to him, and without even having to hunt for words.

"I sure admired your horse, Elizabeth. I'll bet he's Arabian."

John Gandy's head came around. "The boy's a good judge of horseflesh. The horse is Arabian."

Jack glowed with success, but there was more to come. His father said, "Jack has his own horse. Only a two-year-old, but he'll make a good cowpony one of these days. Jack's been working him all winter to get him ready for spring round-up."

Elizabeth said "Oh," and the way she said it Jack knew she thought he was pretty important to be breaking his own horse to ride in a roundup. He basked in the glory of it. He thought how much he'd like to teach her to ride—but maybe she already could. He asked, "Can you ride?"

"Yes," she said, looking at her gloved hands, "but not very well."

John Gandy's eye twinkled. He said to Jack's father, "What she means is that she can't ride like a cowboy. She does all right in the horse shows, though," and this time it was Dave Bannister's laughter that boomed out.

Jack's mother asked Mrs. Gandy where they were staying in town, but before she could answer Mr. Gandy broke in. "Colonel McPherson has offered us the use of his house, so we'll likely go there."

Dave's eyebrows lifted. "You know Colonel McPherson?"

"We knew him well in Winnipeg. We had the pleasure of meeting him and Mrs. McPherson after he retired."

"Well," Dave said. Colonel McPherson had been superintendent of the Mounted Police at Fort McLeod for seven years. He was a fine man and didn't hold with horse racing either, but if John Gandy were a friend of his the horse racing would have to be overlooked.

He glanced toward the door. Ira Peebles was waiting to lock up the church and he was getting impatient. John Gandy saw him too, and said politely that they must be going but that they would be happy to see a lot of the Bannisters during their stay in Windy Butte.

Jack would be happy about it too, so much so that his heart was pounding again. They all walked to the door together, and then the Gandys were picking their way through the mud to their buggy. The mare between the shafts of the democrat was tossing her head impatiently, because she'd had enough of standing around and wanted to get home to her oats.

MORE geese sailed over the Bannister ranch on Monday. Jack counted seven formations from the gravel pit, which was what he and his father had named the rock-strewn field that Dave wanted to put into wheat the following year. But before planting came picking the rocks, a stone at a time, two or three if they were small. The wearying business went on from the time the last snow vanished until the spring round-up. Dave had intended to hire a man the summer before to get the field in shape for wheat, but in a country where homesteads came from the Government for the asking, no one wanted to hire out for wages. There was even a house for the hired man to live in. It was not a grand house, since it was the log cabin Dave had first built when he took the homestead eleven years before, but it was snug and only in a cloudburst did water go through the stout sod roof. But the house stayed empty; and Jack drove the wagon while his father picked the rock and tossed it in.

Jack had planned it for Monday evening after the chores were done, but his courage failed him. Maybe her mother and father wouldn't let her ride the gelding. Maybe she didn't want to ride it. Maybe he had a head full of cotton wool to even think about it. But on Tuesday, he made himself do it.

He went to the barn and saddled the gelding, and when he got back to the house Gus Jensen was in the kitchen. Gus was their nearest neighbor. He was sitting at the kitchen table with Jack's father and they were talking. At least, Gus was talking and Dave was listening. Jack didn't pay much attention. He wished Gus would stop talking a minute so he could ask his father about the mare before he got scared again, but he knew his father wouldn't like it if he interrupted Gus.

"Ay don't know now," Gus was saying, "but he vas playing gude with them cards. Real gude. Will Baker, he vas best poker player in these parts for long time. Not any more, now."

"Cards," Dave said softly, almost to himself.

Gus said, "Will, he vas afraid to go home last night. Them two yearlings he sold to Emil Hawryluk, the money he got for them, it vas to buy vedding dress for his oldest girl. He lose it all."

Jack didn't know what Gus was talking about, but he knew his father did. He could tell by the way his mouth hardened and his eyes went bleak. "It serves Will right, wedding dress or not. He was due to get fleeced one of these days. Every night he's in town you'll find him in the livery stable playing poker."

Gus shrugged and said nothing. Jack knew that when his father looked that way wasn't the best time to ask for things, but Gus had stopped talking and now was his chance. He stepped to the kitchen table. "Dad, may I ride the mare and take the gelding, and go into town?"

When Dave's eyes came around they were still faintly bleak. "Why the two of them?"

"I want to let Elizabeth Gandy ride the gelding."

There was a funny silence in the kitchen and then Dave Bannister said, "I don't want you to have anything to do with Elizabeth Gandy. Her father is a cardshark."

Jack knew then it was John Gandy Gus had been talking about, but the sickening part was that it meant he couldn't see Elizabeth Gandy again. His father was too set in his mind about what was right and what wasn't.

He felt as though he weren't in the kitchen at all. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe it would all fade away—Gus's round blue eyes peering down the table, the checkered red-and-white tablecloth, his father's boots resting on the floor, a little muddy and not much bigger than Jack's now. He waited, but it didn't fade away. It was real.

Gus cleared his throat. "Vell, now, Dave. Ay didn't say exactly he vas a cardshark. Ay say he played gude. Lots of men, they play gude—even me, once in a while. So, should I vin, you vould call me a cardshark?"

DAVE eyed Gus soberly and then Jack saw him smile. In a minute he said, "Maybe you're right, Gus. Maybe it was just a run of good luck, his winning like that. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. After all, he did go to church on Sunday." He frowned at the tablecloth. "Still, I can't say I approve of a man going to church on Sunday and playing poker on Monday."

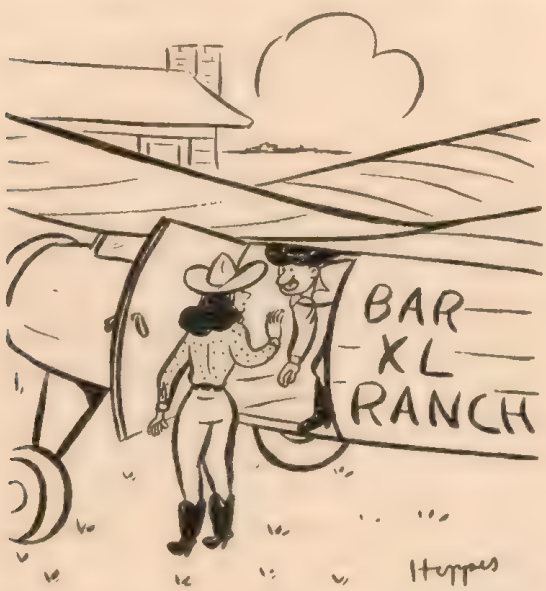
Jack held his breath, and then his father lifted his head. "All right, you can go. But it seems to me John Gandy has a lot of weaknesses, for being as good a friend of Colonel McPherson's as he claims to be."

Jack didn't wait to argue. His father might change his mind. He flung the saddle on the mare, and rode out of the barnyard with the gelding on a lead rope. When he got to town it was growing dusk and the windows in Colonel McPherson's house were warm with lamplight.

He left the horses tied to the stone hitching post with the plaque engraved "McPherson" on it. Mrs. Gandy answered his knock on the door. She smiled when she saw it was Jack, and asked him in. He'd

been in the house when the McPhersons lived in it, but its elegance still awed him. There was even an organ with a cherrywood case in the parlor. Jack knew there wouldn't be a speck of dust on it—or anything else for that matter—because Mrs. McPherson had put dust covers on all the furniture when she and the Colonel had decided to leave it behind and buy new furniture after they had settled down in Winnipeg.

He was glad there were people living in the Colonel's house again. That it was



"Promise you'll ride the range with me again sometime."

the Gandys made it all the better. They seemed to belong in a big gracious house. When Mr. Gandy saw Jack he got up from his chair in the parlor, walked over, and shook hands with him as if it were Jack's father who had come visiting. Elizabeth sat shyly at the organ, where she'd been playing *My Old Kentucky Home,* and folded her hands in her lap.

When Jack said he'd brought the gelding for Elizabeth to ride, Mr. Gandy looked at his watch. "It's getting late for Elizabeth. But—" He smiled and put his watch back in his pocket. "I think we can manage it. Hurry along, Elizabeth, and change your clothes. Quickly, before it gets dark."

Jack knew then she wanted to ride the gelding as much as he wanted her to ride it. She rushed out of the room, and when she came downstairs a minute later she was wearing a black serge riding habit and a small round bowler hat. He thought the clothes were much too good for just riding a horse, but he didn't say so.

They went out together. He was unlooping the mare's reins from the stone hitching post when a bird in a cottonwood tree over their heads burst into song. Elizabeth stopped and Jack saw that she was standing still, listening.

He stood still too because he didn't want to spoil it for her. Waves of lilting song floated from the tree, and then broke off as suddenly as they had started. She turned around and, from the look on her face, the feeling flashed over him that the song had stayed inside her.

He knew it was silly, and yet maybe it wasn't. When she spoke her voice was hushed and a little tremulous. "That was beautiful. What was it?"

He wanted to say something different from what he knew he would say in the end. He didn't know where it came from, but he wanted to say, *I'll never leave you. Wherever you go, I'll follow you.* But he couldn't, because his world of sky and field and distant purple mountain was suddenly different and strange and there was nothing familiar left in it, not even himself. Yet, somehow, it was the same old voice, that sometimes shamed him when it dropped an octave lower without warning, that answered her.

"Whippoorwill. You don't hear them in town often. They aren't tame, like the wrens and swallows and things."

THEY got on the horses after that, but Jack didn't remember much about it. It was a blur of night gathering in, with a hint of frost; of Mr. Willard, the stationmaster, raking and burning last year's leaves at the railway depot; of the long-limbed canter of the gelding beside

him and the heady scent of Elizabeth's perfumed bath soap, that was like the kind his mother only had once a year, at Christmas time.

It was late when he got home. His father was sitting in the kitchen reading the paper from Fort MacLeod, and for a minute he just looked at Jack when he slipped in the door. Then he said quietly, "Better go right to bed, son," and went back to reading the paper.

Jack went to bed, but he didn't sleep until it was nearly time to get up again. After breakfast his father harnessed the mare and drove to town for a sack of seed potatoes he'd forgotten to get the week before, and Jack cleaned out the stalls in the barn where the milk cows were kept.

His father was back by lunch time. He didn't say much to Jack, only asked him to unharness the mare and turn her out to pasture. Then he went into the house. Ten minutes later the mare was out to pasture, and Jack was crossing under the lean-to at the kitchen door, because he knew his mother would be putting the soup on the table.

He heard their voices before he opened the door. His father's was flat and emphatic, his mother's soft and worried. His mother was saying, "But are you sure, Dave—"

"Frank Kennedy has been the conductor on that run since the main line came through here. He was right at Gandy's elbow when Gandy bought the tickets in Winnipeg, and Frank heard every word he said. I tell you the man is a liar."

"But there is some truth in it, Dave. He'll go on to Vancouver when the money comes in."

Jack felt himself go cold. Then his father's voice came again, and there was finality in it. "From another poker game, I suppose. Abbie, he said he was going to Vancouver, when the truth of the matter is he had only so much money, and he bought a ticket for as far west as it would get him, horse, buggy, family and all—which happens to be Windy Butte."

Jack went back across the barnyard. He wished he were small again so he could cry, but he'd left tears behind a long time ago and he wasn't going to go back to them now. He went into the barn and climbed up into the haymow. It was musty and dank from the winter's cold and a layer of fine brown dust lay on the dead dry hay, but he sat down anyway. He drew his legs up, wrapped his arms around them, and thought.

He thought about all of it. The more he thought the worse he felt. Things were a long way from being the way he wanted them. He wanted John Gandy to be a good man. Not just so his father wouldn't forbid him to see Elizabeth, but for Gandy's own sake. Jack didn't mind the card playing or the horse racing or even the little fib about the tickets, but he did mind what it added up to, which was that John Gandy was not honest. More than anything, he wanted the Gandys to stay in Windy Butte, so Elizabeth would be near him. But that wasn't going to come true either. They were going to leave as soon as John Gandy got enough money to buy train tickets for the coast.

He stayed in the haymow a half hour. He knew the soup would be cold and his mother cross, but it didn't seem to matter much. Surprisingly enough, his mother wasn't cross. His father didn't seem cross either, only silent—very silent, even to his mother.

Jack had thought that day was bad, but the next was worse. It brought the final blow, at supper time. It came by way of Will Baker, bringing the milk cow he'd decided to sell to Dave to get the wedding dress. Jack was herding the cows in from pasture; he saw Will come and he saw him go. But he didn't find out that Will had brought news until the cows were in the barn and he'd gone into the summer kitchen to wash up for supper.

HE WAS splashing at the pump when his father appeared in the doorway, his brows pulled down and his mouth stern. He said, "Come here, Jack."

Jack reached for a towel without looking away from his father. He couldn't look away. His legs moved across the clean

earth floor to the step leading into the winter kitchen where his father stood, and his throat felt funny and dry and sort of tight.

His father said, "There'll be no more of your seeing Elizabeth Gandy, Jack. This is the end. They were put out of the McPhersons' house today, lock, stock and barrel. Constable Purdy got a telegram from the Colonel today, a long one. The only thing John Gandy had to do with the Colonel in Winnipeg was to fleece him of that Arabian he's so proud of. The Colonel was so shamed to have been taken in he let Gandy go with the horse, provided he got out of town on the next train."

There wasn't a sound from anywhere. Jack guessed his mother had stopped getting supper long enough to listen. He wished she hadn't. The silence was worse than anything, mostly because it showed there wasn't anything more to be said.

His father wasn't done yet. "As for that rigmarole about the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, the stocks and bonds John Gandy was in the habit of promoting never even existed." He turned his back, and his boots clumped across the floor to the waiting supper table.

Jack finished washing. It surprised him a little that he did, because his heart kept jumping from his stomach to his mouth and he knew he couldn't eat anyhow. But his father would expect him to sit at the table even if he didn't eat, and it was no time to test his father's temper.

It was an unhappy meal. Through his own misery he could tell Will Baker's news had driven a wedge between his father and mother. After supper he went to the barn and mechanically finished up his chores. When he finally fell asleep that night he had a tight and burning headache from thinking so hard, but there was still no way to make John Gandy honest when he wasn't.

Things were better between his father and mother the next morning. He sensed it as soon as he stepped into the kitchen. He caught his father saying, "—didn't sleep a wink myself, Abbie. Serves me right, I guess." And then he saw Jack and said a little sheepishly, "Good morning."

Jack said good morning, and went to his place at the table. His mother carried the bacon and sausage and chops from the stove and set them on the table.

His father said: "You're right, Abbie, and I'm wrong. You've been right all along. The Lord never taught us to kick a man when he's down, even if he's down on account of his own mistakes. I'm going to town this morning to offer John Gandy that job I've been trying to get a man for all year—"

He didn't finish it. He couldn't, because Jack's mother had set down the last platter of food and then she was in his lap with her arms wound around his neck so that her gingham sleeve got in his mouth. She was laughing and almost crying and saying she knew he would, she was proud of him.

Jack helped his father harnest the democrat. He never helped so hard. When it was ready he looked at his father. His father smiled. "Jump in, boy," he said.

The Gandys had gone back to the hotel in Windy Butte. Jack's father let him come in with him.

The clerk at the desk looked up from a pile of bills long enough to say, "Gandy? Room 102, second floor." Then they were going up stairs with the carpet on them wearing a little thin, and along a hall where ferns in big brass pots stood on carved wooden stands.

They stopped at the door that said 102, and Jack saw his father lift his hand and knock. In a minute the door opened, and John Gandy faced them. He was in his shirt sleeves but Jack didn't care about that. What mattered was that Elizabeth was in the room. She was wearing a green gingham pinafore with frills at the shoulders, and there was a little woven basket on her lap with spools of thread in it. Mrs. Gandy was there too, looking dressed-up and sweet, but Jack was only dimly aware of her even when he said hello to her.

JOHN GANDY invited them in, but Jack knew his father wanted to get over the exchanging of pleasantries and speak his mind. He was afraid for a minute what his father had to say wouldn't

sound all right, but when it came it did.

"I hear you've had some trouble, and I've come to see if I can help out," Dave Bannister said. "Now, I've a job I want done on my place—been trying to find a man to do it for pretty near a year now. It's not much of a job, but there's a house for the man who takes it, and forty dollars a month and found. Have a field I want cleared of rock. You take the job, Mr. Gandy, and the house and the money are yours for as long as there's rock left to pick."

John Gandy had a funny look on his face. He peered at Jack's father as though he'd never seen him before. He said slowly, "Thank you, Mr. Bannister. Thank you very much. You're very kind." He stopped, and then said, "Clearing rock, you say? I appreciate your kindness, but I feel I'd not be capable of work of that sort. You see, it's—"

Jack saw the color climbing slowly up his father's jaw. "If you've a reasonably strong back, a pair of eyes, and a pair of hands, you're capable."

"Thank you," John Gandy said again, "but I must say no, Mr. Bannister. Please don't misunderstand my reasons—"

"Mr. Gandy," Jack's father said clearly, "you have no reasons," and he turned his back. Jack felt a hand on his arm a second later, his father's hand, shoving him toward the door.

Nobody said anything. Jack's father reached in front of him, turned him around. Jack knew his father was angry, angrier than he'd ever been before, but he twisted for a frantic glimpse of Elizabeth and wished he hadn't. The unhappiness of her reached clear across the room to him and set hard and firm in his mind before the door closed and he and his father stood in the empty hall.

"Well, that's that," Dave Bannister said, and from the deep misery inside of him, Jack knew it was. He wanted to keep company with Elizabeth so much it made him ache. He could go behind his father's back and sneak away from the homestead to see her, but that couldn't possibly solve anything.

The only thing that would help would be John Gandy changing his ways, and if a house of his own and forty dollars a month wouldn't do it, nothing would. Besides, Jack knew what his father had said was true. Another card game or two and the Gandys would be on the train for Vancouver.

When they got back to the ranch Jack's mother was waiting for them at the gate. Her cheeks were pink and the team had barely halted before she was talking worriedly to Jack's father.

"Dave, some question of the rights to the homestead has come up at the Land Titles Office. Constable MacRorie was just by here now from Calgary. He's telling most of the settlers down here they'd best get to Calgary with their deeds right away. Here's ours. You needn't even unhitch the team."

Dave Bannister sighed. He pushed back his hat, took the deed and said, "Great day in the morning. If it isn't one thing, it's another. Well, lad, jump down. No use your coming along. Besides, your mother'll need you, with me away for two, three days, maybe more. Mud on the Calgary trail's probably up to the axles."

Jack got out of the wagon. His father said a little tiredly, "Well, so long. I won't be any longer than I can help, Abbie." He looked at Jack. "Tell your mother what happened at the hotel today." He backed the team through the gate.

WHEN they went into the house, Jack told his mother about John Gandy's not coming to work for them. He knew it made her feel bad because she didn't mention it again. Then, the second night his father was away, he heard the noise. If he hadn't been sleeping fitfully he wouldn't have heard it, because it came at two o'clock in the morning. When it came the second time he recognized it as the sound of a footstep on the plank leading to the hen house. Suddenly he was wide awake.

He got out of bed and looked out the window. He couldn't see very well in the velvet blackness, but a shadow moved within a shadow and he knew someone was

there, trying to get into the hen house to steal eggs, or maybe even the chickens. He knew what he had to do. He pulled his pants on over his pajamas and tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen where his father kept the rifle.

He didn't wake his mother. He wasn't a boy anymore; now it was his responsibility as well as his father's to look after his mother. He took the rifle from the rack and opened the door into the summer kitchen.

When he stepped into the cool night air from the summer kitchen and levelled the rifle, the man was coming out of the hen house. He had a bag in his hand but no sound came from it. Jack knew the hens in it had had their necks wrung.

He stepped from the shadow of the house into the full moonlight so the man would see the rifle. The man was coming toward him now, head down, not knowing he was there, and Jack filled his lungs to call out. Instead, only a cricket chirped at his feet. The man had lifted his head and looked straight at him, amazement clear on his face in the moonlight, and Jack felt the rifle sag until it pointed at the ground.

"Mr. Gandy," he said hoarsely.

John Gandy's mouth was slackly open, but he didn't speak. He stared at Jack and Jack stared back, while seconds ticked away. Then, from far off, came the jingling of harness chains. John Gandy's head turned toward the sound, but Jack's didn't have to. He could distinguish the noise of their democrat from a hundred others, and when his voice came again it was weak and expressionless.

"It's my father, back from Calgary."

"Your father—" John Gandy said, and Jack knew he wanted to run away. Dimly he wondered why he didn't. But John Gandy stayed on the hen-house plank as if his boots were nailed to it.

The wagon stopped at the front of the house and Jack heard his father get down. Suddenly he wanted to dart through the summer kitchen and put the rifle back on its rack, run upstairs, and not be there at all when his father caught John Gandy. But it was no good. For one thing, there wasn't time. Already his father was picking his way around the house, coming to the summer kitchen to fetch a lantern. Then he was there, and his eyes had lit on the two of them in the moonlight. His grunt of surprise formed itself into words.

"What the—" Dave Bannister said, and his surprise was suddenly gone because he knew what had happened. His jaw took on the set Jack had dreaded all his life. He came forward, and his voice was quiet and even.

"So you've caught yourself a thief, Jack. Well, I might have known. No doubt Mr. Gandy's been making the rounds of the hen houses, knowing all the men hereabouts are off to Calgary with their title deeds."

"No!" Jack heard someone shout, and realized it was himself. The rifle thudded into the soft bed of the vegetable garden, and he was running toward John Gandy, snatching at the bag in his hand, pulling it from him. He put his back to Gandy and faced his father, knowing tears were squeezing from his eyes because the time had come when he'd had more than he could bear without them.

"No!" he shouted again. "I stole the chickens, and Mr. Gandy caught me. I wanted some money, and I knew you wouldn't give it to me, so I came down to get the chickens. When I came out Mr. Gandy was here, and he took the bag from me."

HE COUDN'T see John Gandy's face, but he could see his father's. He knew his father didn't believe it, but that only made it worse. All at once he was cold and sick and afraid, but he was more than that. He was desperate.

"It's true!" he shouted. "I stole the chickens! I did!"

He had the feeling his father didn't move his lips when he spoke. "If that's true, why the rifle?"

"I—I just thought I'd bring it with me for coyotes!"

He saw his father's eyes travel up to John Gandy's. "What do you say, Gandy?"

"It's—as the boy says."

Dave Bannister's eyes grew chilly as they

went from John Gandy's to Jack's. "You're telling a lie to cover up for a thief, boy. And you know what I think of a liar, especially one like that."

Jack wasn't sorry that John Gandy had said what he did, but he swallowed hard. He had to. It was that kind of a thing. For a minute nobody said anything, and then his father stirred a little, big and foreboding and frightening in the colorless moonlight.

"You'd better be on your way, Gandy."

Jack turned then and saw John Gandy's face. It was grey and lifeless and looked hollow under the cheekbones. He walked out of the barnyard without even looking back.

"Go to bed, Jack," Dave Bannister said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Jack went. Somehow the rest of the night spent itself. The sun was well up when he heard his mother and father moving around in the kitchen below his bedroom.

He dressed and went downstairs with knees that oddly wanted to buckle on every step, and when he opened the kitchen door his father straightened up from putting wood in the stove.

His face said everything it had said last night, only it had set until it couldn't be changed.

He said, "Breakfast, Jack. We'll talk after."

Jack moved to the table. His mother set the chops on it, and the potatoes and sausages, all in silence. She fetched the coffee off the stove and she and his father sat down.

His father's head was bending for grace when the knock at the door halted it. His father and mother exchanged glances. Then Dave Bannister got up and went to the door.

When he opened it the silence went tight and unpleasant, and Jack knew it was John Gandy.

He could see only a trouser leg and part of a coat and sleeve beyond the door, but he knew it was Gandy. It was his voice coming into the kitchen, firm, but a little raspy around the edges, as though he were close to worn out but what he had to say wouldn't stand waiting.

"Mr. Bannister, I've come to take that job you offered me. I didn't go home last night. After what your lad did for me, I couldn't."

Jack's father got as far as a dazed, "Well, I—" and then John Gandy was speaking again.

"Last night I couldn't face my wife and daughter. What's more, I couldn't face myself. And if a man can't live with himself, he ought not to live at all. Oh, I reached some very profound conclusions, not the least of which were a couple about my obligations to my family. They're waiting for me now at the entrance to your property."

Dave Bannister cleared his throat, and said stiffly, "Naturally, Mr. Gandy, I'll be happy to have you come—"

John Gandy said quietly, "There's one more thing. My wife and daughter are waiting in a hired carriage, since I no longer own a horse and buggy. The horse will be shipped to Colonel MacPherson, and the buggy I intend to sell to pay off several—ah—debts."

Warmth flooded into Dave Bannister's voice. "You fetch that family of yours up here right now and set them down to breakfast. Always room for more in this house, and you probably hauled them off without food nor drink."

Jack got up from his chair. He knew what he wanted to ask, but somehow he couldn't. Then his father's head came around at the sound of the scraping chair, and a second later his eyes were crinkling at the corners with understanding.

"Off you go, lad. You fetch them."

Jack went, past John Gandy on the doorstep, over the barnyard gate, down the long rutted road with the windbreak of stately cottonwoods on either side, knowing it was a quarter-mile to the end of his father's property, not caring. A wagon was waiting there, with two people in it—or rather three. A lady, a girl, and his own heart.

TWENTY-ONE years ago a man and his wife decided to publish a rodeo magazine. Lots of people thought they were crazy to start any new venture in that depression year, and a rodeo magazine seemed the most hare-brained idea anyone could have. After all, the doubters said, who cares about rodeo except a few cowboys—and can a cowboy read?

But these two brave people set up shop and the first issue of *Hoofs and Horns* was published in Tucson, Ariz. Every month after that until August, 1954, an issue of *Hoofs and Horns* rolled off the presses.

As it turned out, the cowboys could and did read *Hoofs and Horns*, and a lot of other people did too. The publishers, "Hop" and "Ma" Hopkins, became famous in the rodeo world. No cowboy, producer, or contract performer would go through Tucson without stopping in for a chat with the Hopkinses.

About five years ago Hop died, and Ma carried on alone, more beloved than ever. She kept faithful track of blessed events, and of tragic ones too, and published the news in her column called "This and That." No matter where the wars or his adventures took a cowboy, he could always keep up with his friends by reading the second page of rodeo's first magazine.

What we've been leading up to is not the end of *Hoofs and Horns*, but a new beginning. Ma Hopkins has sold her "baby," as she calls it, to the publisher of another rodeo magazine, *Buckboard*, and the two will merge under the *Hoofs and Horns* title.

When Ma announced the change in the last issue she published, she said she would continue as editor. Sure enough, we opened this new-looking *Hoofs and Horns*, and there was her column, warmhearted and chatty as ever. We read it happily, with a fine familiar feeling, until we got to the last paragraph:

"This column . . . is my last one. I shall not be with you again. So let me say that I do so much appreciate the wonderful friendliness that I have enjoyed from you. My address will still be 203 East 2nd St., Tucson, Ariz., so write to me, and if you're down this way, be sure to come and see me. Vaya con Dios."

Her words, we know, are meant for everyone in rodeo, including especially all its fans.

We've known Ma Hopkins, mostly through her letters and our mutual friends, for many years. Lately she hasn't been attending many rodeos, except her pet Fiesta de Los Vaqueros in her home town, but wherever she went everyone seemed to know her. At rodeo conventions she'd be surrounded by her friends and well-wishers. She nearly always wears a gentle smile, and there's always a twinkle in her bright eyes behind her rimless glasses.

She may resign as an editor, but she can't resign from rodeo—it wouldn't let her. Her nickname, "Ma," makes it clear how the cowboys feel about her. So we say to her, as she said to us, "Vaya con Dios."

The merged magazine is being published by J. C. Howe and his son, Tom W. Howe, of Ft. Smith, Ark. They're not exactly newcomers to the sport, since for the past five years they've been putting out *The Buckboard*, which for a time was the official publication of the Rodeo Cowboys' Ass'n.

They made it pretty clear how they felt about Ma by putting her picture on the cover of the first issue of the new *Hoofs and Horns*. (Ma herself would never have thought of putting herself on the cover of the old one."

H & H, by the way, *was* the official publication of the International Rodeo Ass'n, an organization of managers. The new magazine, however, will be independent. The publishers feel they can best serve rodeo by having no ties with any special group within it.

But it's interesting that the two magazines which spoke for these two organizations have got together. We wish the IRA and the RCA would do the same. Not merge, of course, since each represents a different interest, but at least cooperate to the extent of choosing *one* champion for the year instead of two. The Howes agree to this, hoping in print that the IRA and the RCA will reach a practical working agreement for the good of both groups and of rodeo as a whole.

The Howes have another good point, which we'd like to quote:

"Much ado has been made in recent years to have rodeo recognized as a sport, a sure-enough event designed wholly for entertainment. Efforts in this direction have not been too successful, although some progress has been made, and a few sports writers have recognized this Western sport for what it really is. The average rodeo spectator does not understand the finer points of judging a bucking horse ride, and to him rodeo is good entertainment, not necessarily an athletic contest.

"We'd like to see this spectator educated to the point where he has an idea how to mark a ride, but we think it more important that he be entertained to the point where he comes back for more."

The main thing, of course, is not *what* the cash customer thinks he's coming to see. He can consider rodeo a dramatic spectacle or a man vs. beast contest—just as long as he does come and he does enjoy himself.

H & H has done a lot to make sure the spectator does enjoy himself. It has strongly condemned and publicized the few dishonest rodeo promoters and contestants. It has always supported and publicized the best in rodeo.

However, it's greatest service, we think, has been in passing along the gossip of the arena, and of the folks behind the chutes. After all, anyone is going to enjoy watching a bucking contest or a roping match more if he knows a little about the men and the animals involved.

However, it's possible to be a rodeo fan even if you never come to a rodeo, judging by some of the addresses on the H & H mailing list. It goes, of course, to every state in the Union, to the West Indies, South America and Australia. It goes to an American working in Saudi Arabia, and *he* enjoys it so much he sent a subscription to a girl friend of his in England. He's been corresponding with her, he explained, and she asked him so much about rodeo that he thought she'd better have the magazine to answer her questions. And, he says, if she reads it carefully, she'll probably know more about rodeo than he does.

In Australia rodeo is as big a sport and/or spectacle as it is here. And Casey Tibbs, the bronc-riding champ, is practically a national hero. There are rodeos in Cuba, in Argentinia, and something like them even in India. Undoubtedly wherever there are horses that don't want to be ridden and cattle that don't want to be driven, there's some fellow daring enough to want to try to mount the former and catch the latter. Maybe we'd better be careful about calling rodeo the West's own sport.

But whether rodeo is native to the West of whether it has sprung up independently all over the world, *Hoofs and Horns* has done a great deal to encourage it. We're sure the new *Hoofs and Horns* will continue to promote good shows, fair play, and enthusiasm for rodeo, and we hope it prospers and grows.

Adios, THE EDITORS

WHAT IS RUSSIA'S MASTER PLAN

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Coroner's Range

By Coe Williams

"I won't quit," Ellen said. "I'll fight."

THE STORY SO FAR: Land-hungry rancher STEVE McKENNA secretly backs WARD GRAFTON in making trouble between the ranchers and sheeper ELLEN McCLOUD. Small rancher MORGAN LETHAM suspects Grafton of murdering WHIT KERSHNER, but his attempts to prove it make the other ranchers think Letham has an unreasoning grudge against Grafton.

Whit's embittered daughter, ANN, sells out to McKenna, and contradicts evidence Letham has that Grafton has killed another rancher, CASS CARROLL. Letham is forced to run from the angry ranchers, now definitely turned against him. Going home, he finds Grafton's men driving sheep across his range. Letham shoots his way out and, as this concluding installment opens, he has found a temporary hiding place in the hills . . .

CONCLUSION

HERE in the rock-toothed pocket into which he had been driven, cold dwelt, and danger. For the last hour or more the night wind had been strengthening, and now it was scouring this high bench of the plateau in broken gusts, bitterly cold.

Squatting on his heels, with the Winchester within easy reach, Morgan Letham drew his canvas windbreaker tighter. It didn't help much. Pity the poor fool, he thought miserably, who would let himself be caught out this season of the year without a sheepskin. The irony of that brought

a crusty smile to his scarred face. Here he was, a cowman who had grown up hating sheep, now wishing he had a wool-lined coat to seal out the night's raw chill.

He inclined his head, listening intently, but heard nothing but the gusty rush of the wind. There was no relief in the silence, though, for in his mind he could place the approximate location of each of Ward Grafton's killers—a pair on those flanking ridges, the rest closing off the mouth of this narrow pocket.

Hunkered down with the cliff at his back, Letham considered his situation with stolid matter-of-factness. Any way he looked at it he had his tail in a bind. Only way out of this box is the way I got in, he thought. He knew he might as well put a gun to his own head and pull the trigger as to hope to break past Grafton's triggermen. This fact he accepted with flinty impassiveness.

There was a fatalistic streak in him that had carried him out of more than one tight corner. He wasted no time brooding over the probable end of this brutal night. A man could not hope to live forever. When your time came you either tucked your tail under and gave up, or you stood on your hind legs and fought. Morg Letham had never run away from a fight.

SO I'LL mount up and go busting back down this gully. I'll make Grafton earn his meat, he vowed. He shoved to his feet, a lank man with a rebel look in his battered features. Turning to his horse, he shoved the Winchester into its scabbard, his hopes not reaching beyond the loads in his six-shooter.

He stood beside his horse a long moment, one strong regret having its way with him. This was going to be tough on Ellen McCloud. He wished bitterly he could have got a warning through to her. He wished, even more, that he could somehow have made up for the way he had treated her. She had given him a hand when he had needed it most; he had repaid her with thorny contempt, because she ran sheep. There was no fool like a hard-headed cowman.

That stew you fixed for me was the best I ever ate, Ellen, he told her mentally.

There was sheep meat in that stew. And now, alone and lonely, he was wishing miserably he could meet this last fight feeling the warmth of a coat lined with sheep's wool. Ellen had been right. Beef and cow hides weren't everything. There was a place in the world for mutton and wool. It took a cowman crowded against the coroner's door to know that.

And suddenly, achingly, a thought cried out in him. Ellen, I wish to God that you and I . . . He clamped a lid on that futile thought, knowing bitterly there could be nothing in it for him now. A man never realized what he had missed until he had forever lost it.

He was reaching for the reins when a whispery fragment or sound fetched him sharply around, his hand striking down to his gun. The rim of the cliff was a full thirty feet above him, backdropped by a stand of scrubby pines. Something moved up there. He heard it again—the guarded call of a voice.

He drew his gun. He spoke, soft with wariness. *"Quien es?"*

"It's Ellen—Ellen McCloud."

He pouched his gun. "Get away from that rim, girl!" He said in a soft explosion of anxiety.

He could see her more clearly now, a diffused slimness crouching at the rim of the cliff. Her voice reached down to him, hushed. "The rope, Morgan—use the rope!"

He heard the whisper of a rope uncoiling down the face of the cliff. He paced to it, found it firm. Ellen, he knew, had dallied to one of the pines up there. Good girl. A blaze of jubilation went through him. Not tonight, Grafton, he exulted inwardly. You haven't killed your meat yet, damn you.

There was danger in the noise he would make going up the granite wall. He turned back to his horse, a thought stretching his bruised lips into a rakehell grin. He faced his horse around, and with a sudden whack of his hand sent the animal plunging wildly down the narrow defile. The result was

immediate. Somwhere close below he heard Ward Grafton's hard blare of warning.

"Here he comes!"

GUNS broke loose their crashing racket, and there was no more silence left in the night. Letham went hand over hand up the rope. When he pulled himself across the rim he found Ellen McCloud waiting for him, her face a pale oval drawn against the darkness of the night.

"I didn't think I would ever find you in time," she said.

"It's a mystery to me how you managed," Letham answered, and was raked by an old remorse. "Or why you ever bothered to try."

She let that pass, dismissing it with a small lift of her shoulders. "Ward Grafton and his gang ran off thirty or more head of my sheep late this evening," she told him, a note of quiet rage in her voice. "They wounded one of my herders, and while Hamp Clelling was taking him to the house I picked up Grafton's trail."

"Foolish thing to do," Letham murmured. "Foolish and very brave, Ellen." It was his salute to her.

"They're making me look like a range grabber, Morgan."

"I know."

"You were right about Grafton from the beginning. He's everything you said he was."

Letham said nothing.

The tag end of strain held her voice to a thin, shaken edge. "When I heard the shooting at your place I thought you were finished. Then I could tell by the racket that you had managed to break past them. I couldn't locate you in the darkness, with them crowding you so close, so I headed here to the rim. When you didn't show up, I knew they had you cornered against one of the cliffs. I kept working along the rim until I finally found you."

"Another debt I owe you," Letham said. The far-below racket of shooting abruptly dropped off. He smiled thinly. "They've caught the horse I spooked past them. Grafton is doing some handsome cussing about now."

"We've got to get away from here, Morgan."

"They'll figure I'm trying to get away on foot. It'll take them time to get the idea I went up the cliff—with the help of an angel and a good rope."

Wind bunched its frigid gusts against them, laced with slanting flecks of driven snow. On this high range the weather was taking on the brawling temper of a blizzard. There would be plenty of snow up here by morning, Letham thought. He touched the girl's arm and they moved into the pines, leading her horse behind them by the reins.

ELLEN turned abruptly, a slim straight shape standing close in front of him. Against the deepening howl of the wind her voice rose on a note of bitter, weary anger.

"I haven't done anything to the valley people, Morgan. I'm not trying to take any range from them. Why are they pushing me into this war?"

"It's not the cowmen doing this," Letham said. "Not the little outfits, Ellen. All they see against you is what Ward Grafton shaped up for them to see. You're only the fuse he's using to set off the powder-keg."

She was tired. She was looking back at another range and another war and the grave of her father. She spoke slowly, with a let-down weariness of spirit and body.

"All these night raids, all these killings—just to take back a few hundred head of sheep and an overgrazed range."

Letham's smile was dismal. "It's a bigger thing than Mogul, Ellen."

She raised her eyes, not understanding.

"It's Rocking Chair throwing the real weight behind Grafton," he told her meagerly. "It figures neat and smooth. McKenna takes over the valley, and Grafton gets Mogul back after you're finished off."

In the snow-laced darkness, her lips tightened. "It's going to take a lot of doing to finish me off, Morgan."

He raised his big hands, looked at them

moodily. They were hands that had worked hard and fought hard, calloused hands that remembered the soft warmth of a girl whose lie had turned all his friends and neighbors relentlessly against him.

"Maybe not," he said, and regretted this thing he had to tell Ellen McCloud. "They've got your outfit tagged with the killing of Cass Carroll."

Her eyes rounded with shocked disbelief. "But I was there and heard Cass name Ward Grafton!"

His mouth twisted. "I told them about Cass. They wouldn't believe me."

She made an angry gesture with her hand. "Then I'll tell them. Hamp Clelling and Ollie will tell them."

"You think they'll believe sheepers?" Letham asked wearily. "Not much, Ellen. Not after Ann Kershner telling them all that Cass named one of your men."

This, then, was the final blow. He waited for defeat to dredge all the spirit out of her. But it did not. Her shoulders lifted, straightened, and into her eyes rose a swift defiance, a bright and shining flame.

"I won't quit. I'll fight."

"Figured you would."

"There are so many of them, so few of us!"

"It's going to be tough, Ellen."

"I'm a sheeper, Morgan, and you're a cowman."

"Makes no difference now, does it? We're caught in the same bind."

"Then you'll help?"

"Be proud to, ma'am."

"It's so much to ask, Morgan."

"Ellen?" he said softly, and when she lifted her eyes he reached out and brought her to him.

He let his lips down to hers, and in him there surged the deep and heady knowledge that in this girl were qualities he had never found in Ann Kershner—gentleness and generosity, torrents and tempests waiting to be stirred and brought out of their depths by the released power of her own wanting. There was flame in her kiss.

Shaken by the awe of this new and

[*Turn page*]

TO PEOPLE Who Want to Write

but can't get started

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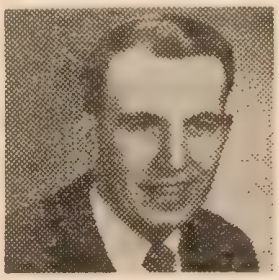

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glowing world that had opened up for him, Letham drew away from her at last, his voice a quick, low hoarseness.

"I had to do that, Ellen."

She said nothing, showing him the faintest of knowing smiles.

"When I had my back to that cliff I thought Grafton had me slabbed. I was scared, Ellen, really scared. I didn't want to die without seeing you again, without telling you that you and I. . . ."

The words were in him, rich and full, all the things he wanted so much to tell her, but he couldn't find them.

"I know, Morgan," she said.

He gazed at her in wonderment.

She said very softly, "I died a thousand deaths along that rim back there, Morgan, afraid I wouldn't find you in time."

DURING the three hours since Morgan Letham had made his break out of Ben Wiggam's house, a deep and thorny fury had ridden roughshod through Sheriff Clyde Rybolt. He didn't like any man throwing a gun on him; it was gall he had never been able to swallow. But now, as the searching men were returning with the horses Letham had spooked away from the tie-rail, Rybolt was feeling the wrath drain out of him.

It troubled him, this slipping away of his outraged temper. In anger a lawman could commit a rash act and retain a measure of justification in his conscience. Fury was a prop that could support many weaknesses, blinding a badgeman to possible wrongs. But he was no longer finding it possible to hold that fine edge of rage in him, and he knew he was coming up against a decision more vital than any he had ever before faced.

Sensible thing, he told himself, was to shut his eyes and let well enough alone. He had been getting along tolerably these last few years. For the first time in his life he had been able to see prospects of a piece of land and some cows to support him in his declining years. That meant something to a man seeing more and more gray in his beard.

He knew well enough how he had got this first glimpse at security. It dated back to the day he had watched Doc Jessup dig an outlaw's bullet out of his leg. The gunman had been making no trouble, only passing through town. But there was a wanted dodger tacked up in Rybolt's office, and being what he was then, he had gone after the man. It had ended with the outlaw on a slab and Doc Jessup digging a chunk of lead out of the sheriff's leg. Clyde Rybolt had done some serious thinking that day.

A sheriff can always find trouble if he hunts it. He had filed that conclusion down to a sharper point. Die young and you're a hero; die old and you're a bum, busted down and swamping out saloons for your meals. Nobody cared. Only way to make sheriffing pay was to play politics and to learn when to close your eyes.

The night had turned raw, laced with rain. That meant snow on Mogul's upper levels. Clyde Rybolt smiled. A real blizzard was cutting loose up there. Listening to the high-level howling of wind, a sense of relief rubbed some of the worries out of him. There was nothing like a full-scale blizzard to cool off the tempers of angry men.

But as he watched the cowmen come stringing back to the house, his relief thinned out and the old pressure of worry came back to him. Those men were tired from their long hunt for the horses Letham had spooked off into the night, but in their weariness was a savage, unrelenting fury that would not let go.

Rybolt cornered Ben Wiggam and Charley Lake as they came tramping toward the house. "You boys still set on going after Letham and the McClouds tonight?"

Wiggam's gaze was pure acid. "You trying to talk us out of it?"

"Now I didn't say anything like that," said Rybolt reasonably. "There's a nasty storm cutting loose up there, though."

Walt Eccles was with them, a man who carried Cass Carroll's death in his mind, his stare riding roughly across Rybolt's face as he shook rain from his soggy hat. He spat.

"The chore's too tough for you, Sheriff, you can stay home."

A stinging heat climbed into Clyde Rybolt's face and he laid a measuring gaze on the Singletree foreman. "Walt," he said slowly. "You're worked up over Cass's death. That's natural. Only don't let it crowd you onto a bronc you can't ride."

ECCLES snorted, and followed Wiggam and Lake into the house. A contrary thought crossgrained Sheriff Rybolt's mind. Since Doc Jessup had dug the bullet from his leg he had diligently cultivated a politician's equable poise. In showing his temper to Eccles he had taken a step in the wrong direction, back toward that blade-thin line of his old days. For a brief moment he had forgotten the piece of land and the cows he had dreamed about. He would not forget again.

He stood under the low gallery, moodily watching the other men come filing back with their recovered horses. Mad enough to spit in the devil's eye, they were. Steve McKenna came racking in to the tie-rail, followed by Lou Ronns, Melavin, and the rest of his hardcase crew, chilled to the bone and soaked to the skin. It was enough to make Rybolt grin in the darkness. He can sure raise a barrel of hell, that Letham, he thought. He's got guts.

His thoughts kept swinging back to the day Letham had brought Whit Kershner's body to Longbow, speaking plainly his conviction that Ward Grafton was to blame for that murder.

"I'd have had a riot on my hands if I hadn't read the scripture to Letham that day," he muttered. But it rankled his pride to know that what he had done had been prodded on by Steve McKenna and Ward Grafton.

A sheriff who wanted a piece of land and cows of his own could not afford the luxury of a thin-skinned pride, Rybolt told himself. Since he caught that bullet in his leg he had been a politician before being a lawman. Holding that in mind, he tried to cling to his own desires, while feeling a regretting sadness for the one being sacrificed.

[*Turn page*]

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It made a nice sound in his mind, but it did not help his conscience.

He stood alone in the rain-lashed night, nagged by convictions he could no longer ignore. All the night raids on the valley outfits had been blamed on the Mogul sheepers. Ellen McCloud didn't strike Rybolt as a range grabber, or her men as fools who would leave plain tracks pointing toward Mogul after a raid.

There was more. There was, for instance, Ann Kershner giving that odd glance toward Steve McKenna just before testifying Cass Carroll had named a Mogul sheeper as his killer. A man might lie once out of spiteful malice, but he wouldn't keep lying again and again regardless of what his friends and neighbors thought. Letham's stubborn refusal to bend meant something.

He was digging too deep; he was seeing too much for his own conscience. He heeled savagely around and went into the house. The men, he saw, were checking their guns and putting on heavy coats. He watched them bitterly. There was no pretense of legality in this blow they were getting ready to strike. If the sheriff rode with them, fine—if he did not, then they would tie into Letham and the McCloud sheepers, regardless. This, then, was nothing more than mob action, and would be just as much a crime as the murders of Whit Kershner and Cass Carroll.

The men were watching him, seeing something in him that he was not aware of himself. He was conscious of Steve McKenna's narrowing interest, of the alerting speculation of McKenna's crew of hardcases. Lou Ronns, a bone-lean man with high, sloping shoulders, let his cigar drop to the floor, grinding it deliberately under his boot. A sardonic half-smile was warping Ernie Melavin's puckery mouth.

McKENNA spoke in his thinly derisive way. "Clyde, you've got the look of a man trying to do a thing he knows is plain foolish."

Rybolt twitched his shoulders. He felt old as time. He was only dimly aware of muttering something under his breath. McKenna's amusement honed sharper.

"Speak louder, Clyde. We couldn't hear you."

Rybolt had to rummage back into his mind to find what he had muttered. Finding it, he was mildly shocked. But he didn't mind repeating it. He didn't mind at all.

"I said to hell with the cows and the piece of land."

McKenna's woman-soft mouth pursed in polite apology. "You're not making yourself clear, Clyde."

"That was an old man kicking a fool's dream out of his mind," Rybolt said. "You wouldn't understand."

He hadn't felt his shoulders so square for years. He was getting old, yes, but not soft. Soft he would never be.

He said flatly, "There are too many tangles in this mess that haven't been straightened out yet. I've got a hunch there's more to this than is on the surface. There will be no riding against Letham and the sheepers tonight. You hear me? That's a job for my office to handle."

For a moment complete fury stormed into the eyes of Ben Wiggam and his neighbors. Then the fury drained. It pleased Clyde Rybolt to read in their stares a thing he had not seen for longer than he cared to remember—respect and thoughtful consideration.

McKenna said dryly, "You tired of being sheriff, Clyde?"

Rybolt gazed wearily at the cowman. "Yeah, I know. I've heard it before, McKenna. You're the big auger, and if I don't mind my manners you'll grind me under. I've heard the same talk in other towns in my time."

"It's something for an old man to think about, Clyde."

Rybolt eyed the man stonily. "You asked a question. No, I'm not tired of being sheriff. I haven't been one for five years. I'm just a shape and a shadow wearing a shiny tin badge."

McKenna's smile pinched tighter. There was a slow shifting of the hardcases around the Rocking Chair owner. Rybolt had seen such things before.

He suddenly barked, "Stand put, all of

you! Ronns, Melavin, stop fiddling around those guns!"' He looked at McKenna. "Bring your dogs to heel, mister, before they do something that gets *you* hurt."

The gunmen were waiting, not in the least disturbed. McKenna's smile dried out. He shrugged, ruled, as always, by shrewdness and caution.

"You're the law, Clyde. What you say goes."

From some old wisdom, Clyde Rybolt knew the pressure had been taken out of this room. Ben Wiggam and his neighbors would not ride tonight, and McKenna was not one to tromp hard until he was certain of the ground under him.

He shrugged the tension out of his shoulders, speaking reasonably. "It would be plain foolish to ride up there on a night like this. I've got questions to ask that Mogul outfit, but they can wait."

OUTSIDE, he mounted up and jogged his bay away from the house. Rain swept the valley in hard, pelting sheets, and high on Mogul he could hear the deep-throated grumbling of the wind. He rode on, alone in the night, and lonely. But there were no regrets in him for the stand he had taken. He felt taller and more alive than he had in years.

He had no illusions about what he had brought down on himself. When Rocking Chair frowned the rest of the county's voters did likewise. He wouldn't have a ghost of a chance next election. Oddly enough, though, that did not matter so much now.

A couple of miles south of the house he drew his bay to a reluctant halt, nagged by an increasing sense of worry. Reading the law to McKenna and the others had been one thing, but there were more irons in this fire than that.

He wanted another palaver with Morg Letham before that fellow's crusty temper pushed him off the deep end. And he knew it was high time he had a session with Ward Grafton and those sharpies who rode with him. He had heard they were shacked

[*Turn page*]

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up in the old Gontermann cabin, at the foot of Cache mountain. A steady ride would take him there in two or three hours. Swinging his bay around, he cut toward the flank of the plateau on a route he calculated would save him a mile or two of riding.

He was pushing through a thicket of young cottonwoods when he heard the approach of horsemen angling toward him from the direction of the Wiggam house. Unthinking wariness, an instinct rooted in a score of past dangers, brought him to an instant halt while still inside the thicket.

The sound of a familiar voice—a slashing gust of rain muted the words—knifed a rankled anger into him. It was Steve McKenna's voice. So now he's too big in the britches for poor men's law, he thought.

The riders came racking along the trail, plainly making for the first rise of Mogul's wall. They came to a halt just out from the thicket, while one of them swung out of saddle to tighten a loose cinch. They were so close Rybolt could have thrown his hat and hit them.

A man—Lou Ronns—cursed corrosively. "A hell of a night to do a job of work."

A cigar gleamed and ebbed in the darkness, painting a brief ruddiness across Steve McKenna's face.

"Cut the grouching, Ronns. This is work you were hired to do."

"Thought you said Grafton would be in on this with us," Ronns said crossly, and Clyde Rybolt felt a sudden interest.

"He'll be," answered McKenna shortly. "If Jess doesn't find him then we'll swing this alone. You boys are supposed to be good enough to handle the chore."

McKenna's barb missed its mark. Another flurry of rain spattered them, driven by a raw wind.

Ronns swore savagely. "Bad enough down here. Worse up there. I keep thinking of that blizzard hitting the rim."

THE RAIN had killed McKenna's cigar. He lit it again, the flare of the cupped match throwing a hawk's shadow across his face. There was no woman's softness there now. The pressures tightened in Clyde Rybolt. Here was a man primed to do murder, or order it done.

"You had any sense, you'd be glad we've got this storm. That McCloud girl has a handy crew working for her. A night like this they won't be expecting trouble."

At this, Ronns's tone of voice pinched down, and he slanted a troubled gaze at the men around him. "So we get Hamp Clelling and the kid who heard Carroll name Grafton. What about the girl? She heard him too."

"*Los muertos no hablan*," snapped McKenna. "Or maybe you don't savvy Mex."

"Don't ride me," grunted Ronns irritably "Simple enough for you to give the orders. Only it ain't going to be easy to line up that girl and put a bullet in her. That's a trick for someone besides me."

A coldness of shock, a sickness of final knowing, sledged Sheriff Rybolt's mind, and through it came a deep blaze of wrath. Through the pulse-pound of his hate he heard McKenna's short bark of scorn.

"Ellen McCloud's sheepers have been raiding this valley, remember. They drove thirty head of my cows into the quicksands. So tonight I hit back. Tomorrow I'll be very sorry that girl happened to get in the way of a bullet during the shooting. Just one of those things—a regrettable accident for which the girl herself was entirely to blame."

"Oh, no!" Rybolt said, and was startled by the sound of his own voice. In a kind of deep and wondering shock he saw the gunmen jerk around, hands swiftly dropping. He heard his own voice again, a warning that seemed to crack out of its own volition. "Enough of that! Away from those guns, all of you!"

It was too late now for escape, too late even for the fear rising thin and dismal through him. He saw the hands lift from their guns, and that made him feel a little better—just a little.

He walked his horse out of the thicket, thinking that he ought to pull the six-shooter from under his coat, but hoping dismally he would not be forced to. He had seen too many killings in his time,

been a part of too many smoky tragedies.

McKenna's eyes moved, urgently searching the thicket behind the sheriff. It was Ernie Melavin who had been tightening the cinch, and that man, half-hidden behind the horse, was the one to watch.

McKenna suddenly yelled, "Get him!"

A man should know a few things after thirty years behind a badge; he should savvy the dangers of a long coat hanging over his gun. Clyde Rybolt knew—only too well and too late.

He saw Ernie Melavin twist away from his horse. But the shot came from Lou Ronns's leaping gun. A single red finger lunged its dire promise through the night at Rybolt. Fame burst through his head, a rushing, roaring agony that picked him out of the saddle and carried him up and up, ever upward through nothingness. A fading thought echoed along a lost corridor in his mind: the piece of land and the cows hadn't been so important after all.

* * *

Inside Ben Wiggam's cabin, Charley Lake raised his head, frowning. "Sounded like a shot."

Ben Wiggam set down his cup of coffee, spatting a sourness from his mouth. "Didn't hear anything."

"Wind busting a tree, I guess," Charley grunted. "It's a hell of a night."

ONCE he was below the rim and out of reach of the wind, the cold was less intense. The snow marking the trail lay in undisturbed whiteness in the cheerless first-dawn light. There would be no sun today, Letham thought, and was thankful, for as long as the storm raged up there he could keep up his hopes for Ellen McCloud and her men.

The cold lessened steadily as he worked his way down the switchback, changing the snow from a powdery dryness to a mushy wetness. As he picked his way lower on the plateau wall, the falling flakes turned fat and soggy, mixed with rain. Then he

[Turn page]

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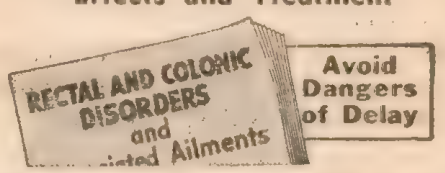

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was out of the snow and traveling downward through a steady dripping rain. Dawn had not yet lightened these depths, and when he reached the floor of the valley he did not see the body on the trail until his horse suddenly spooked aside, almost unseating him.

Quieting the animal, he dropped out of the saddle. A swift dread clenched in him as he recognized Clyde Rybolt, face down in the mud, the side of his head one ghastly mass of congealed blood. He was not dead, though. Life still pulsed in the lawman and his hand was still gripping the six-shooter beneath his long coat. Fast gun under a slow coat; you knew better than that, Clyde, Letham thought sadly.

The eyelids flickered. He dragged the wounded man off the trail and propped him in a sitting position against the stump of a pine. Rybolt's head sagged down on his chest. He forced it up as consciousness ribboned into him, glaring in a dazed way at Letham and trying again to get his gun out. Letham pushed the hand away from the weapon.

"Take it easy, Clyde."

"Who are you?"

"Morg Letham. How do you feel?"

"Stop mumbling, man." Rybolt flared irrationally. He touched the side of his head, groaning softly. "Brace a crowd of toughs like McKenna's with your gun under your coat," he said ruefully. "Some old fools just ask to be killed."

Letham left him and poked around through the wet thicket until he located Rybolt's horse, standing ground-hitched in the lightening gloom. He turned back, leading the animal to where the sheriff sat slumped against the stump. He squatted beside the man, his gaze as bitter as the day.

"You say McKenna's gunnies did this?"

The sheriff reared up a little, staring at Letham in glazed stupor. "Wha' that you said?"

A sense of despairing temper swarmed through Morgan Letham. "Get a hold on yourself, Clyde! You've been shot. I came down the trail and found you here. Where'd McKenna and his men go after they did this? I've got to know!"

The flare of his voice snapped sanity deeper into the sheriff's dazed eyes. He wagged his head from side to side, speaking slowly, thickly.

"Yeah—McKenna. Melavin tried, but it was Lou Ronns shot me."

"Where'd they go, man?"

"After you, they said. To finish off the McCloud girl, I heard 'em say. A drink would help, Morg."

Letham went to the sheriff's horse and found the bottle in the saddle pocket. He tilted it to Rybolt's mouth, then capped it and returned it to the saddle pouch.

"You've got to get to the doc, Clyde. You feel up to riding?"

"Help me into the saddle. I'll stick."

Letham hauled the man up from the ground and onto the horse. "You'll have to make it alone, sheriff."

"What are you going to do, Morg?"

"Go after McKenna and Grafton."

He put the reins into the lawman's hand. Rybolt's head wagged around, peering at him in a slack, miserable way. "It's a pity about that girl. A hell of a shame, Morg."

BY THE time they reached the rim, Letham knew they had a fight on their hands just to travel across that blizzard-battered range to Ellen McCloud's house. The wind had blown itself out, but snow continued to fall in a thick, swirling whiteness.

Once past the scrubby pines that rimmed the plateau, visibility shortened to a few indistinct yards, and a man had to line out his direction by sheer reckoning. Cache Mountain, the guiding landmark in this country, was lost in the impenetrable white mists, and in that raw cold the riders bunched together to borrow confidence from each other.

"Haven't been up here since Grafton took this range over," Ben Wiggam said, and the tone of his voice argued plainly his dislike for this work. A cowman riding into such hellish weather to give a hand to sheepers! He said crossly, "Which way to the house?"

All eyes turned to Letham. He shook

his head doubtfully. Worry nagged him; the pressure of time tormented him. "I went there last night, riding double behind Ellen McCloud. Couldn't see anything in the storm. A couple miles or so west of the rim, seemed to me."

The cold had blanched Charley Lake's face, crusting his thick brows with rime. "Which way is west, I'd like to know? I'm fresh out of compasses, Letham, and I never met the man who could calculate two miles in a storm like this."

Walt Eccles bulked huge in his heavy coat, with snow crusted on his chest and shoulders and the memory of Cass Carroll's murder holding its blaze of bitter hate in him. His voice was harsh with malevolent impatience.

"You came to us with a windy about McKenna and his hardcases trying to kill Sheriff Rybolt last night. Maybe Charley Lake was right about hearing a shot, or maybe you've turned sheeper and are trying to lead us into a set-up." His hand, deep in his pocket, was gripping a six-shooter. He showed it to Letham. "You try to cut a fancy one, buster, and you're dead!"

Letham eyed the man coldly. "Walt, you scare me."

A sense of impotence and desperation dredged through him. He was losing his hold on these men. He could feel that. They had put a small measure of trust in him because he had come openly to them in spite of their rankled tempers, but now that thready faith was slipping away.

Looking at them through the whirling whiteness, he raked them harshly with his voice. "I've tried to pound sense into you. Your fight isn't with the sheepers. It's McKenna and Grafton playing it sharp to cut the land out from under you. You let them finish off Ellen McCloud's outfit, and you're done."

He had hammered them with that once, and it had brought their reluctant support. Now it did not. They were cold; they were cowmen on a sheep range, and they didn't like it.

There was a wisdom in Morgan Letham

[*Turn page*]

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that had been learned in other tight scrapes. Idleness bred uncertainties; it was motion that hardened a man's will.

"Let's get along," he said roughly, and turned his horse.

Wiggam raised a hand. "Now, I don't know. . . ."

WITHOUT turning in his saddle, Letham yelled harshly, "Damn it, come on! No time to waste talking!" He slapped his horse into movement, giving them no opportunity for argument. "Spread out. Make a line, but keep in sight of each other. This is a McCloud horse I'm on. It'll take us in if I give it it's head."

It was a long gamble, and he knew it as he released the reins. In this blinding swirl of falling snow it was a simple matter for man or beast to get lost. The horse began veering off to the left, but he did not check it. Please, God, don't make us too late, he thought.

They traveled through a world of spinning white. The snow, hock deep and powder dry, swirled around the hoofs of the horses; the cold cut through clothes like a knife. Letham's mount stepped into a snow-leveled depression and almost went down, thrashing and snorting as it came plunging out of the wallow, blowing long banners of steam. Somewhere to one side he could hear a man's ragged cursing as he floundered through a flank-deep drift.

The wind was picking up again, kicking the powdery snow up in blinding devil's twists. The men on Letham's right flank came slanting in, their heads bent low to escape the jets of frigid air. Ben Wiggam wanted no more of this. He said so with his eyes and the flat bark of his voice.

"That horse of yours doesn't know where it's going any more than we do, Letham. I know when I've had enough. My boys and I are pulling out."

Then, muffled by the gusting wind, a man hollered somewhere on the left flank. They veered off in that direction, bucking through drifted snow. They came together at the corner of a pole corral. Dim and shapeless through the swirling white, they could make out the diffused lines of the house. They moved on, riding slowly and warily. They pulled reins again, doubtful and on edge.

A Singletree rider muttered worriedly, "Something funny here."

Cold as it was, there was no smoke in the snow-matted stone chimney. Letham sent a shout to the house. No answer. A fear, dismal and dreading, twisted sharply in him, and he kicked his horse forward in a floundering run. He hit the ground at the gallery steps, rigid, unable to go on, as the others came milling up in a group behind him.

The man lay close to the door, drifted over with snow, one exposed hand, stiff and gray, thrust out of the whiteness to the door. Letham stepped forward, bent. He had never seen the fellow before, a redhead with his gun untouched in its holster. The frozen, clotted crimson was centered between his shoulders; he had died without knowing what hit him.

Letham raised his eyes to Wiggam and the other cowmen. He said, low, harsh, hatingly, "Now do you believe what I've been telling you?"

No man answered.

He pushed up to his feet with sickness tearing at his belly and at his mind. He was thinking of the girl who had nursed him when he was hurt and had come to him on a night when killers had cornered him against a cliff. And he was remembering the promise of her kiss—a futile promise now, eternally lost, forever gone.

He hated to go in, but he had to. He tried the door. It was barred on the inside. At least, then, the girl and her men had had a few moments to fight back. He used his gun to rake the splinters out of a punctured window. Climbing through, he looked bitterly at the wreckage, the unmistakeable signs of a short and violent and death-filled battle.

The kid, the one Ellen had called Ollie, was slumped on the floor beneath another window. His eyes were wide and staring, his mouth open as though his last thought had been broken in the middle of a word, a prayer.

OTHER than the kid, the room was empty. They prowled on through the house, searching. The back door was ajar, leaking a thin fan of snow across the kitchen floor.

"Looks like they made a run for it," said Charley Lake.

Ben Wiggam suddenly cursed, an explosive harshness in the frigid hush of the house. "We'll find that girl, and we'll find McKenna and Grafton and all those other kill-for-pay sidewinders!"

There were no tracks; the drifting snow had obliterated them. There was no sound to guide a man, no sign of life out there where they searched. Mogul was a vast, far-reaching tableland that hid its loss well in weather like this. Darkness drove them back to the ranch house, weary to the bone and morose with defeat.

It was Wiggam and Charley Lake who took over from Letham, to do what had to be done. "If the girl's still alive she'll hang on until morning. No sense wasting what chances we've got on a gamble we don't have a chance of winning."

There was, Letham knew, truth in that. Carrying on the search at night, in this blizzard, could get them nothing at all. Wiggam turned to one of his men.

"You see to the horses, Anse?"

The puncher nodded. "There's a barn off at the back with plenty of hay and grain. A whole passel of sheep are bunched back there. Don't ask me why, but I threw feed out to them, too."

They carried the bodies of the kid and the redhead into one of the other rooms. Charley Lake went to the kitchen. Letham dropped into a chair, then rose almost at once and went out on the gallery. Beaten as he was by weariness, he couldn't force himself to slack off. He stared out at the snow-streaked night. The wind was letting up again, but snow was still falling.

The storm was both a curse and a blessing—a curse because it rendered his efforts useless and futile, a blessing because it had let Ellen escape from the house and was probably forcing McKenna and his gunmen

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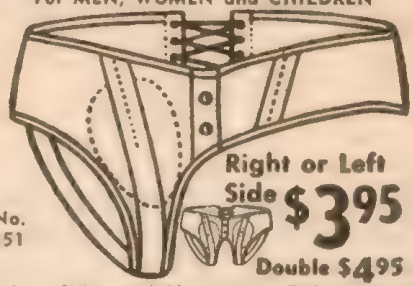

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to stay holed up. Men could not hunt down and kill in this kind of weather. In that burned the urgent spark of Letham's hope.

Ben Wiggam opened the door behind him. "You want to catch your death of weather out here, Morg?"

"I'm trying to think, Ben."

"You can think better in a warm room."

The impact of heat from the bulging red belly of the stove brought instant pain to Letham's hands and feet. He commenced pacing around the room, staying far back from the stove as he rubbed his hands and slapped circulation back into his face. He turned abruptly to the cowman.

"I was just thinking, Ben."

"So?"

"When a storm hits cattle, they turn their tails to the wind and drift with it."

Wiggam nodded. "Natural thing to do. You figure the girl headed down-wind?"

"My guess is she did just the opposite," Letham said. "It's what I'd do. A chance, anyhow, of out-guessing McKenna's gunnies, at least for a while."

WIGGAM considered this thoughtfully, then nodded again. "Maybe you're right. North from here hits into some mighty rough country with plenty of likely places for holing up."

Letham remembered. To the north, Mogul tapered off against a narrow canyon that knifed between the plateau and the towering shoulder of Cache Mountain. It was a harsh and forbidding tangle, with both walls sheer enough to shed loose snow almost as rapidly as it fell. Slides would have that narrow passage clogged to depths no horse or man could fight through. It was something for a man to keep close in mind when he shaped his plans.

Charley Lake raised his voice from the kitchen, calling them to come and get it. "Sheep meat," he said, and eyed them all belligerently. "Don't let me hear any complaints from any of you. I sampled that meat and it eats good. Next to a neighbor's beef I think I could learn to like mutton best."

They ate, and the men scattered around the main room to get what sleep they could. Turning through another door, Letham found himself in a room with bright curtains across the windows and a Mexican shawl adding gay color to one wall. It was a room holding a girl's intimate treasures, delicate things and fragile foofaraws that a range man seldom saw. It was Ellen's room, he knew, and in his mind he spoke a prayer for her.

He stretched out across the bed, knowing that sleep would come reluctantly to him tonight, if at all.

All during the night, Morgan Letham had heard the bleating of the sheep packed around the barn. He got up before dawn to pitch feed out to them, but when he got to the barn he found a Singletree puncher there before him, forking hay out of the loft window. Coming up on the man, he caught an abashed expression on the fellow's cold-reddened face.

"Hate sheep. Always have. But danged if I can stand any animal going hungry in weather like this."

Letham wisely said nothing as he found himself a pitchfork and helped with the chore. A man learned a few things after beating his head against a wall long enough. As one man learned, so did a valley and a town learn. The world wasn't made to graze cattle alone, no matter what some die-hard cowmen stubbornly believed.

They mounted up and turned away from the house, pointing north. In some places the wind had whipped bare the rocky ground; in others the drifts were higher than a man's head, forcing them to find a way around. They heard the slap of a distant shot, just as the sun burst its blinding brilliance across the whitened range.

Ben slanted his knowing glance across to Letham.

"Reckon that tells what we needed to know."

Letham nodded, trying to force up the pace of his horse. Speed was not possible in that belly-deep powdery snow. Impatience tormented him. A goaded urgency struck through him as another flurry of gunshots came racketing across the frigid air.

HE SENT his horse plunging head-on into a high ridge of drifted snow. The animal bogged down, floundering helplessly, and he had to back it out and find a way around. They came out on the narrows of the plateau, and here Mogul slanted off to its end, less than a hundred yards ahead. It was too steep now for prudent riding. Letham flung himself out of saddle and went ahead on foot, followed by the others.

A thousand fears tormented his mind as he slogged his way through that smother of snow. Suppose Ellen had been hit. No, he refused to let that thought stay in his mind. The snow stung his eyes, and he tried to form a mental picture from the sound of the shooting. Ellen and her men would be making their stand against one of the canyon's cliffs, with McKenna and his men bucking the drifts to get to them.

He halted abruptly, the rim of the canyon a short stride ahead of him, hearing Charley Lake's smothered oath of alarm. Another step would have sent him plunging to those hidden rocks a hundred feet below.

This was Mogul's end. Below, clogged from wall to wall with loose, powdery snow, was Hell's Gate canyon. That narrow passage went twisting off to the north around a shoulder of Cache Mountain. Somewhere not far beyond that hump a rifle broke out its vicious racket.

"Drifts down there are six-seven feet deep," Ben Wiggam groaned. "What are we going to do, Morg? We can't see 'em, and we can't get through."

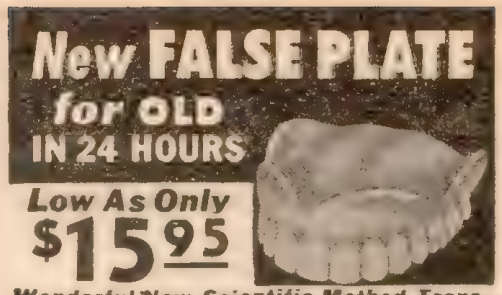
A short distance to their right the wall had been broken down by erosion, forming a sloping ramp down to the canyon floor. Letham pivoted suddenly to Charley Lake.

"You and your men rustle back to the house and herd those sheep here, Charley."

The cowman's eyes widened. "You crazy, man? You couldn't buck a herd of cattle through those drifts, let alone sheep."

"Don't argue, Charley. Just bring up the sheep, while the rest of us kick open a track for you."

[*Turn page*]



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They went plowing into the plateau's drifts, Letham and Wiggam and those wind-reddened cowhands, breaking open a route for the herd of sheep. The woolies came in a close-packed line, bleating and steaming the air as they were crowded down the rocky ramp to the canyon's floor.

At this place the snow was not so deep; their small hoofs trampled it down, packing it. Then they were against the drift that some time during the night or the day before had slid down from the canyon's wall. They couldn't force through that head-high smother of snow. They began bunching, a solid mass of humped wool backs and black muzzles lifted for air.

"Start them circling," Letham said. A burst of shooting from beyond the hump of the mountain tore at his own uncertainties. He wasn't sure of this thing he was doing. He had only, at some time, somewhere, heard range gossip about a thing like this.

"Get them milling, damn it," he said savagely.

This was a maneuver a cowhand understood, although no man there could see the reason for it. Nor could Letham feel any certainty in him. A man could only remember the range gossip, real or false, and add to it his own prayer.

The mass of sheep was starting to mill. They became a great grinding circle, close-packed, bleating, steaming the air as they made their witless revolutions. Letham motioned for two men to help him put pressure against them toward the drifts ahead.

AND now a hard and fierce joy burst through him. He saw the rim of the drift crumple away as the circling sheep pressed against it. The snow was no longer a slanted heap; it was a sheer white wall, higher than a man's head, eroding away as the flanks of the circle chewed at it. Snow caved down and was trampled solid by that grinding mass of hoofs.

Cattle, for all their bulk and power, could not have been made to do it. This was the strength of humble beasts, the might of a thousand tiny trampling hoofs. Letham watched awe rise into the faces of the cowmen, as the milling sheep chewed down the drift foot by foot, yard by yard. They were at the bend of the canyon now, the drift tapering down again to normal depths.

Through the fog of steam rising from the animals, Letham could see across a hundred yards of unbroken whiteness to where men were floundering in another powdery drift. There were McKenna and Grafton and Ronns and Deaf Bassett—all those kill-for-pay specials—along with Torveen and Selby and Melavin and Gil Larkin.

One of those men steadied, shoulder-deep in snow, and started levering bullets down-canyon at a target Letham could not see. Hate lashed through him, like a drawn blade, and he knew Wiggam and Lake and the valley's cowmen were bunched around him, seeing now what before they had refused to believe.

"I've been waiting for this," he said, low and thin, and lifted his gun.

"Then let's get at it," Wiggam grunted, and kicked his horse forward.

It was a thing a man sees in all its broad violence, but never remembers afterward in its flame-pierced details. The mind reaches out through the hurt and the hate, but the memory rebels and will have none of it. It was that way with Morgan Letham.

It was Lou Ronns who first saw the riders coming through the snow behind them. He yelled and fired, then his voice flung out a second harsh warning. All those men whipped around, their guns stabbing flame through the black bursts of smoke. A man behind Letham cried out and fell.

In that gaunt moment, McKenna alone saw the madness of what his men were doing. "No, you fools! Don't shoot!"

But McKenna's cunning was blunted by the guilt and fear that were in his men. Deception was beyond them; they could see only their own guilt and the dire promise of penalty. They answered it with guns.

Letham heard the driven anger of a close bullet, and his horse broke into a sudden panicked pitching. He threw himself out of saddle and landed knee-deep in snow. A horse went plunging past him, veered, and fell, spilling its rider.

Letham paced to one side, hearing the

angry cry of bullets. A man came floundering out of the drifts toward him, running through the black bursts of his gunsmoke. Letham lined up and fired, and the man stopped running. He was Ward Grafton. He stood there, shocked amazement written on his face and in his eyes. Then the man fell.

THE cowmen were moving forward, searching the snow for the wounded and dead. Then a crew of Singletree hands were pushing the sheep against the drift, starting them milling again, grinding down the whiteness and trampling it under.

When the last wall of snow was broken down, he saw Ellen and her men making their way through the herd of sheep. They halted, sheepers looking at cowmen and remembering hate and malice.

Then Ben Wiggam slowly grinned. "Mighty handy to have around after a blizzard, a herd of sheep."

The old tensions drained off. Hamp Clelling was talking the edge from his nerves. "When they hit us at the house, we made a run for it and got this far before bogging down in the snow. McKenna and his men were on our tails." He swung his arm toward the flank of the mountain. "I climbed up yonder and kicked loose a snowslide between us and McKenna. That and the storm kept them off us. Mighty neighborly of you men to come along when you did."

Ellen was gripping Letham's arm. "You haven't heard a word I said, Morgan."

"You were saying how much you loved me," he said.

She was standing very straight before him, very close. "If you'd been paying the slightest attention you'd know perfectly well I was . . . was saying. . . ."

He murmured, "Then what were you saying, Ellen?"

"That it was about time you kissed me, Morgan Letham."

He said softly, "Women talk too much."

"So do men," she breathed, and lifted her face to his. "Much too much, my dear, at a time like this."

THE END

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF SCORPIO
OCT. 23—NOV. 22

MORE Western states entered the Federal Union under the sign of Scorpio than any other sign of the Zodiac. Nevada entered on October 31, 1864, Montana entered on November 8, 1889, and both North and South Dakota entered on November 2, six days earlier. The state of Washington entered on November 11, 1889, and Oklahoma entered on November 16, 1907. These six states represent a sizable area, and we may point out that the Sign of Scorpio has two emblems—the Scorpio and the Eagle. Since the eagle is our National bird it is particularly appropriate that this sign was ascendant during these times.

Men of Scorpio can follow either of two extremes—they can be as vicious as the scorpion or as noble as the eagle, whichever they choose. Sometimes there are blends of both qualities in the same personality.

Generally the sons of Scorpio have a love of the outdoors. They are energetic and athletic and are quick to answer a challenge. They admire physical strength and vitality. In seeking a mate they are happiest when a woman can keep up with their interests, both intellectually and athletically. They want a woman who can share these interests, but never one who will surpass or outshine them!

Kindness is one of the strong traits of the Scorpio man, and he loves children and animals. Because he is strong himself, he is usually tolerant of others' weakness.

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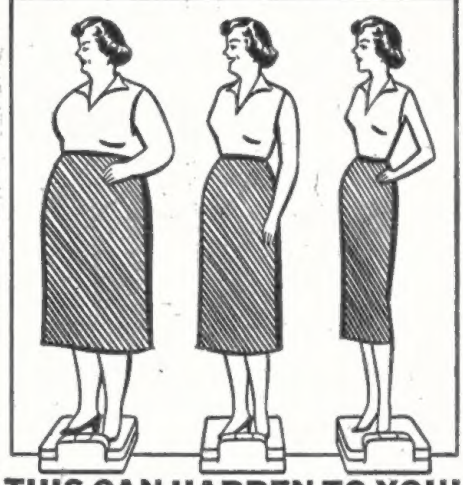

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